

SPEC

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ON SPEC

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Speculative Writing

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EDITORIAL* VOLUME 3 ISSUE 3

(or: are you sure it's safe to go back in the hot tub???)

by Marianne O. Nielsen,
General Figurehead & Shark Bait




What you are holding in your mittened/gloved/chapped hands is *ON SPEC*'s humour issue. Half the stories are guaranteed¹ to offend you; the other half will make you chuckle if not roll on the floor in unmitigated glee. The trick, of course, is that you won't know which is which until you read them².

One of the important things we learned in putting this issue together is that everyone has a different sense of humour³. One person's Spider Robinson is another person's Salman Rushdie⁴. Working in a co-op structure as we do, we found this out the hard way, although we should have suspected. I think every single story (*well . . . with a rare exception or two . . .*) garnered reactions of "You want to print THIS!? It's sexist, it's racist, it's age-ist, it's offensive, it's NOT FUNNY!"⁵ from someone in the co-op. At the same time, someone else would pipe up, "Are you nuts?! That's my favourite story!"

Soooooo — be a Trojan: take a risk. If we offend you, humble apologies⁶; if we make you laugh, good; if the earth moves for you, tell Canada Council. We will have proved once again that, in spite of all rumours to the contrary, Canadians *do* have a sense of humour. (*We do, don't we? I'm sure we do, we had it last week . . . did you look under the fridge?*)

We would like to express our profound appreciation to Guest Editors Leslie Gadallah and Spider Robinson, who joined Doug Barbour, Candace Jane Dorsey and J. Brian Clarke on the Editorial Advisory Committee. You are brave and noble beings⁷ to thus subject yourselves. Thanks to all of you.

Finally, a note of congratulations to Robert Runté (whose story "The Luck of Charles Harcourt" appeared in the premiere issue of *ON SPEC*). As you all probably know by now, Worldcon will be held in Winnipeg in 1994, and Robert Runté is being honoured as the Fan Guest of Honour. I can't think of a more worthy individual⁸. Now if he would only write more . . . 

*The rest of the Editorial Staff (none of whom bear any resemblance to living, dead, undead persons; characters stored on electronic media; or existing on another astral plane) decline to accept responsibility for any bad jokes herein.

¹Guaranteed for two years, but only if read in zero-gravity.

²Half an hour later in Newfoundland.

³"Humour is a reaction to breaking mild taboos . . ." Margaret Visser (*Then there's medium, hot and atomic taboos . . .*)

⁴"The fastest way to turn something into evil is to place it beyond criticism." B.H.

⁵Obviously, a statement by someone who is "humorously challenged."

⁶Humble, grovelling, snivelling apologies, but no refunds.

⁷Read: "suckers."

⁸Except maybe Gandhi. (But he's dead.)

⁹I think we need a bigger boat . . .



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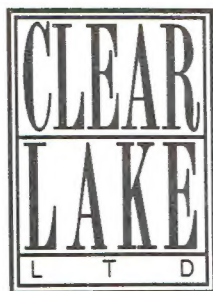
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Pushing Buttons

by Michael Skeet

illustrated by Dory A. Rikkonen

Larry knew something was wrong the moment he stepped through the elevator doorway and saw his car. It wasn't the way the car sagged down on the driver's side that bothered him. Sure, it looked like a ship taking on water and getting ready to sink. But that was normal. Even new, the suspension on the Sunflower GT (as cheap a two-seater as could be bought from the friendly moguls of Singapore) was so flaccid that it wallowed and rolled like a drunken televangelist preaching brimstone from a trampoline. Larry's Sunflower was far from new, and he'd grown accustomed to becoming seasick on the expressway.

No, it wasn't the way the car looked. It was the way it was moving while still parked. Larry hadn't grown accustomed to the car wobbling while parked, mostly because it didn't. For the Sunflower to be quivering in its stall like a four-cylinder, two-stroke junkie, could only mean that someone was inside — someone uninvited. He was being robbed.

No doubt the perpetrator was after the stereo. Larry drove a long way to work — a distance made longer by the Sunflower's perverse engineering — and he had found it necessary to indulge himself by replacing the car's original radio with a top-of-the-line Digital Entertainment System from Radio Shack. It had cost him more than a month's salary, and he'd be paying back the loan for another three years, but it had saved his sanity during more than one traffic slowdown. And now someone was trying to steal it.

Larry acted quickly, with the instinct of a child whose toys are being put

away before he's finished playing with them.¹ There was a legal, registered Mongoose .425 Magnum up in his apartment, but he knew he'd never get there in time. With no other option, he punched 911 and his building's location code on the elevator's phone and told the police computer to send the officers to level four of the parking garage. Then, keys in hand, he set out to make a citizen's arrest.

It turned out to be disappointingly easy. The perp's head was under the dash, looking for wires to rip out, when Larry reached the car. Larry put the key in the door. When it locked, with a satisfying *clunk*, the perp's head shot up in alarm. The head was still under the dashboard, though, so "up" in this case was a distance of about three centimetres terminating in a bulkhead of vinyl-covered, badly stapled particleboard. In the next few seconds, Larry learned some new words.

His vocabulary was further enhanced with the perp tried the passenger-side door, only to discover what Larry had discovered the day after buying the Sunflower: the inside handle of the passenger door didn't work. The door could only be opened from outside.² The perp pounded the window in frustration, then crawled awkwardly over the stick-shift and into the driver's seat. For a second, Larry's and the perp's eyes met, and Larry saw the savage, desperate look of a wild animal in a trap, or possibly a politician photographed with his hand in someone else's pants. Then the perp began hammering on the lock-switch, trying to force the lock against Larry's hands on the key.

In his long years, though, as an assistant manager at Smiling Buddha's Taco Nirvana, Larry had handled countless hundred-litre tubs of Smiley's Patented Nearly Hot Sauce®. This had turned the muscles and tendons of his shoulders, forearms and wrists into, if not Rippling Bands of Steel, then at least a superior sort of Plastic With Attractive Wood-Grain Veneer. Against the perp, whose only recent exercise seemed to have involved the manipulation of a television remote control, Larry held out with ease.

After a few minutes of struggle and a further demonstration that language was at its most powerful when it was the least effective, the perp gave up and slumped back in the driver's seat, staring sullenly through the cracked windshield at the crumbling concrete of the parking garage wall. Larry allowed himself only a cursory glance at the perp, enough to satisfy himself that

¹ This instinct seems to fade somewhat as people grow older and discover that some things are more fun than toys. Sex, for instance. In some people, however, the instinctive desire to obtain and hold onto toys grows stronger with age. These people invariably end up in charge of military procurement programs.

² Larry had refrained from having this repaired, thinking that it might lend him an advantage on dates. It hadn't.

the young man with the aggressively short hair, weak mouth, and spotty complexion was indeed an amoral, sociopathic degenerate. Then he turned his gaze away, and passed the time by counting his pulse rate as it returned to normal.

After what seemed like only a moment, but was in fact forty minutes,³ the police arrived. Larry's having caught the perp in the act seemed to take the officers by surprise: at first, the two constables just circled the Sunflower, staring at the perp like a pair of dogs encountering an unguarded beefsteak and unwilling to trust their good fortune. Finally, one relieved Larry and removed the perp, who took advantage of the brief period between being locked into one car and being locked into another, by spitting at Larry a highly imaginative suggestion involving Larry, his mother, and the contents of a small-appliance store. Larry just smiled as he felt his pulse go up and the tendons in his neck tighten. This could only make it easier.

"Congratulations and thank you, Mr. Lavin," the other constable said. "Have you decided yet how you wish to proceed, or would you like us to read you your options?"

"No need," Larry said. "I've decided. I want the best money can buy." The constable's jaw dropped. "I'm going for the death penalty," Larry said.

*

The idea that everything has its price, and justice doubly so, was not a new one. What was new was the federal government's decision to make this a paying proposition, and to make justice truly accessible to all by providing for easy financing. The Mortgage Insurance Corporation of the Justice Department did not make justice loans itself, but it served as guarantor for those who could not otherwise afford to seek redress.

The new system had grown — as most new systems do — out of dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of the old. In an increasingly individualistic society, social sanctions alone no longer had much power. The threat of imprisonment did not appear to strike enough fear into the hearts of perpetrators to prevent them from stealing, beating and killing.⁴ Since the old form of punishing criminals no longer seemed to work, the architects of the new justice decided to concentrate instead on compensating the victims. Opinion polls showed that the one form of compensation deemed desirable by both victims and potential victims was cash.

So a sort of fee schedule was set up, under which convicted criminals were

³ This was a rapid response: there were no donut shops in the neighbourhood, a factor which was taken into account on peoples' insurance premiums.

⁴ Those who suggested it never had were ignored, save to have their names recorded for further attention when nobody was looking.

bound to provide financial compensation to their victims. Those who could afford to pay, paid. Those who could not had Justice Mortgages taken out on their behalf. These they paid back, if necessary by working under chemical compulsion in the personal services industry. There was no noticeable drop in the crime rate following the conversion to a fiscally based justice system, but few complained. Victims of criminal acts were now at least able to bank the tangible evidence that justice had been done. And since the awards were taxable, and the cost of administration was added to each sentence, the justice system was not only self-supporting, it made a profit. The accountants said it did, anyway.

It wasn't long after the introduction of pay-per-play justice that a consulting firm working for the federal government discovered that, if you were rich enough, you could literally get away with murder. Was this fair to those who could not afford to murder without going into debt? And what about the victims? Faced with the choice between solving a moral dilemma or expanding the system's profit base, the people through their government chose to codify a schedule of prices for physical punishments, and made Justice Mortgages available to victims and their families as well. A rich murderer could no longer expect to be able to walk free after paying the victim's designated beneficiaries — in fact, if the survivors were angry enough, the murderer might never walk anywhere again. Once more the system was balanced — more or less — and once again the people were happy and the money poured in. And if Justice was no longer blind, at least now her eyes were obscured by designer sunglasses.

*

"Do I have this correct?" asked Anastasia Kudelka, Manager Personal Loans. "You're going to ask for the death penalty on a conviction for Grand Theft Stereo?"

"That's right," Larry said. Ms. Kudelka made him nervous. He wiped his palms on his pants; they were his work pants, polyester treated with a powerful stain repellent, and the sweat simply beaded, glistening, before rolling off his legs to fall on the carpet.

"Have you talked this over with the Attorney-General's office?" Ms. Kudelka asked. "Do you have any idea how much it's going to cost you to trade up the sentence that many grades? Do you realize how big your mortgage is going to be?"

"I do," Larry said. "I really believe in this, and I'm prepared to pay the price for my belief."

"That makes me feel much better," Ms. Kudelka said. "I'm glad this is no idle whim, and I'm sure our shareholders feel the same way. What's your

annual salary, Mr. Lavin?"

Larry told her. Okay, Taco Nirvana wasn't going to outpay the World Bank, but the benefits package was nice.⁵ The company paid to have his pants stain-proofed, for instance. That didn't make much of an impression on Ms. Kudelka, though. Before Larry could describe to her his plans for increasing his take-home by working overtime and cashing out his two weeks of vacation, Ms. Kudelka had hit the <escape> button three times in rapid succession, and the loan application with his name on it had gone to electronic hell.

Interviews at two other banks and four trust companies ended the same way, and Larry began to wonder just how serious was the commitment of the personal finance industry toward the concept of justice for all. He said as much when he went that night for his weekly dinner with his Uncle Bob and Aunt Betty.

"You're making a fundamental error, son," Uncle Bob said as he passed the tuna surprise.⁶ "You're confusing the roles of the lending institutions and the Justice Mortgage Insurance Corporation. The JMIC is in business to guarantee your mortgage, it's true. But that's all. And the JMIC won't guarantee any loan that the lenders can't justify making."

"But that's not fair!" Larry spilled the stewed fiddleheads in his anguish. "It's supposed to be justice for everybody."

"It's there, dear," Aunt Betty said while Uncle Bob cleaned the mess from the table. "You're just looking past it. You're asking for more justice than you can afford. You should try to avenge yourself within your means."

"Look at us," said Uncle Bob. "When we were run down by that psychotic drug-addict bicycle courier and your Aunt Betty lost her leg below the knee, you didn't see us going into hock demanding an eye for a tooth. We played by the rules and took the money — and it was enough to pay off the house *and* buy that marvellous electronic leg. *That's* how the justice system works." He polished off a second helping of surprise.

"And we know we did the right thing," Aunt Betty said with a gentle smile, "because two weeks after we cashed his cheque, the punk got taken out by a bus." Her electronic leg hummed quietly as it vacuumed up a stray fiddlehead from the floor.

"Justice has to be about more than money," Larry said doggedly. "It has to be about principles, and one of those principles is the right to own property. Somebody has to remind the sociopathic bastards of the world that this country was founded on the right to own things. Owning things — stereos, toaster

⁵ Larry was in fact well-paid for a food services industry employee. Unfortunately, this was not unlike being exceptionally extroverted for an accountant, or unusually honest for a politician.

⁶ The surprise was that the tuna had been replaced with gerbil.

ovens, the Northwest Territories — is the basis of our whole society. How can you defend society unless you defend its basis? And how can you defend its basis unless you're prepared to go to the full extent the law provides?"

"Maybe if he'd been trying to steal the Northwest Territories, dear —"

"Principles are irreducible, Aunt Betty," Larry said. Aunt Betty's leg hummed — either it agreed with him, or it had found another fiddlehead.

"I don't recall you being this worked up when your Aunt Betty was in hospital having spokes surgically removed from her," Uncle Bob said, clearing dishes from the table.

"Aw, you know I love you both," Larry said. "But protection of the individual is already well-established as a principle of justice. And I'm not sure if I could make you understand how I feel about my Digital Entertainment System. I guess it's sort of like . . . I love you two, but I really, really *like* my stereo."

"Well," said Aunt Betty as she served the apricot crumble,"⁷ "we want you to know that we're happy that you wanted to talk to us about this. And we're proud that you're prepared to stand up for something you believe in."

"Would you help me get my mortgage?" Larry asked.

"Don't be stupid," Uncle Bob said.

Larry got his mortgage anyway. The telephone database, it turned out, had a whole section devoted to mortgage companies whose relationship to the chartered banks was more or less the same as that of a street-corner drug dealer to the provincial Liquor Control Board. They had names like Ken's Friendly But Muscular Mortgage Co. or The We-Know-Where-You-Live Finance Co. Their ads all said more or less the same thing: "Credit Rating Less Than Zero? Banks Won't Let You Through Their Doors? Turned Away By Your Own Family? Doing Time For Armed Robbery? Come To Us! We'll Lend To ANYBODY!" Larry wondered how a business could survive lending to people the banks wouldn't touch with a ten-metre riot control stick, but he made an appointment anyway.

After a harrowing morning spent with Mr. Ken (who turned out to be much more muscular than friendly), Larry had his money — and his answer. Mr. Ken, it turned out, charged an interest rate so high it took four Soviet mathematicians to compound it.⁸ Before he could take the cheque, Larry had

⁷ Which was exactly what it appeared to be. Canadians take their desserts very seriously.

⁸ Soviet mathematicians were highly valued by Western governments for their ability to manipulate economic data to show a country's economy continuing to grow while personal income was falling to the point where people could no longer afford real food and had to scrounge what they could. Gerbil, for instance.

to sign a form acknowledging of his own free will that, should he fail to keep pace with the rather rigorous repayment schedule, there was a place waiting for him in the personal services industry.

His obtaining the money, however, combined with his having caught the perp in the act, guaranteed a conviction. What's more, it guaranteed the sentence Larry had asked for. Justice may no longer have been completely blind, but money was as loud as it had ever been. Larry wasn't required to be at the trial save to testify, but he attended every session anyway, taking copious notes. There had been some interest expressed in making his story into a Movie of the Week, and that would help a lot in paying the mortgage.

Larry felt a surge of pride as he heard the judge pronounce sentence, the sentence *he'd* asked for. There *is* justice, he thought. And anyone can buy it.

*

The pride he'd felt in court paled in comparison to the way he felt the next morning, when he was called by the Central Holding Jail and informed that he was to report at 11:30 that night for the execution. This was the ultimate vindication of the principle, of the right to property. Larry was so excited he called the producer who wanted to do the Movie of the Week and invited her to meet him at the jail, as his guest.

It was a cool night, but Larry's face was flushed as he parked across the street from the jail and got out of his car. The Sunflower wobbled its best wishes as he closed and locked the door.

The jail didn't look anything like a jail should — it looked like a modern office building, complete with mirrored windows that wouldn't open. There were plenty of guards, though, so that part was fine. Two of them escorted him inside to an elevator, set in a corner by itself and with no call buttons. One of the guards inserted a key in a slot, and the doors opened. There were no buttons on the control panel, either — just another slot, into which the second guard inserted another key, which closed the door and started them on a slow, funereal descent.

"You're late," said a woman in a dark business suit as the doors opened.

"Am I?" Larry checked his watch. It read 88:88. "That's funny. It was working when I left the apartment."

The woman introduced herself as Melinda Tuttle of the Ministry of Justice. It was her job to oversee the execution. "You're supposed to meet Lawrence in five minutes, Mr. Lavin," she said. "That doesn't give us very much time to show you how this works."

"Why do I need to know how it works? And who's Lawrence?"

Tuttle turned to him, showing teeth but not smiling. "Ezekial Lawrence," she said. "The condemned. Surely you can't already have forgotten him."

"I never paid much attention to who he was," Larry said. "Why do I have to meet him?"

"Didn't they tell you, Mr. Lavin? You're pushing the button. You're the executioner tonight." She strode away, heels echoing damply down the dimly

lit corridor.

"Wait a minute," Larry said when he and the guards caught up with her. They were in a small room dominated by a whole wall of opaque smoked glass. "This wasn't part of the deal. Nobody told me about this."

"I'm surprised you didn't demand it as part of the sentence," Tuttle said. "Well, not to worry, Mr. Lavin. We're not picking on you. This is standard government policy."

Now Larry saw that they were not alone in the room. Four people in suits — his producer among them — stood in one corner; each appeared to be trying to count the number of places they would rather be tonight.⁹ As he turned to look at them, Larry saw four others — including a woman in a clerical collar — come through the doorway. One of them walked up to Tuttle. "He's ready, ma'am."

Tuttle sighed. "Okay, Mr. Lavin," she said, "get over here for the short version of this lesson. There is a man on the other side of this glass. You have paid to have him killed. Now you are going to kill him. When this clock" — she pointed to a digital readout next to a big red button — "reaches exactly midnight, you will press the red button. This will complete a circuit which will send a surge of high-voltage electricity through his body. The surge will repeat at ten-second intervals until our monitors show him to be dead, or until we black out the whole metro region, whichever comes first. And now" — she turned a gray knob and the glass brightened — "the man you're about to kill would like a word with you."

In spite of himself, Larry turned to the glass. The perp was in an even smaller room, strapped into a plastic and metal contraption. He didn't struggle. Somehow — maybe it was the clean, pressed prison uniform — he looked smaller now than he had in court or in the parking garage. The perp looked at the people in the room until he found Larry.

"Jeez, man," he said, "it was only a freakin' stereo."

Larry turned back to Tuttle. "I don't know about this," he began.

Tuttle adjusted the knob. "He can't see or hear us now, Mr. Lavin, even though we can still see him." For the first time, she smiled at Larry. "Don't worry about your response, Mr. Lavin. Most people have second thoughts about capital punishment when they're called upon to actually do the killing. The Ministry finds that this helps sharpen people's focus, helps them to understand why successive governments have opposed capital punishment in principle and practice for nearly fifty years."

"But I'm not opposed!" Larry stared in a mixture of awe and horror at the button and the clock, whose readout switched as he watched from 11:58:59 to

⁹ Interestingly enough, each of them concluded that the list of places it would be preferable to be included the outermost two circles of hell, but stopped well short of Dryden, Ontario.

11:59:00. "I believe that the sentence was right; I'm just not sure that I can—"

"If you want this man dead, Mr. Lavin, you have to kill him yourself." Tuttle emphasized the words *dead* and *kill*, as though she were trying to get across a new concept to a particularly stupid pupil or possibly a cabinet minister.

"I don't want him dead! It's not personal, don't you see? It's a principle, the right to own property is a fundamental principle and it's our duty to uphold fundamental principles."

11:59:45 . . .

"Do you mean fundamental principles," Tuttle asked, "like 'Thou shalt not kill'?"

A wave of disgust swept over Larry, and the disgust led to anger, and the anger was unfocused enough that it allowed itself to be directed at Tuttle and, through her, across the glass. In his anger Larry found the strength to push the button.

The clock showed 0:00:00.

Nobody would talk to him after save the producer, whose words, brief though they were, were pithy enough to make it clear to Larry that there would be no movie. He didn't care. He'd gone through a crisis, and come out on the other side with his principles intact. He might well spend the rest of his functional life as a chemically numb personal services employee, but it would be worth it.¹⁰

At the top of the steps at the jail entrance, he stopped. A solitary streetlight shone on his car, the light reflecting brightly from the side windows — except for a band of black at the top of the driver's door. He hadn't left the window open . . .

He flew across the street, heart pounding, eyes seeing only that strip of black. He wrenched open the door — and there was the stereo, still held in place by its anti-theft lock. He exhaled a long, loud sign of relief, and settled into his seat. The car wobbled hello — or at least the driver's side did . . .

Down the road, two figures, each staggering under a load, stepped into the glare of a streetlight. Larry looked at them. He got out of the car, walked around to the passenger side, and looked down at the blocks. Then he looked up again as the two distant figures got into their car and drove off with his tires. ¶

¹⁰ He was *sure* it would be worth it.

Surrender Dorothy!

by Diane Mapes

Joey turned his face away from the cloud-splattered sky to watch his dad labour over the barbecuing hamburgers.

"Dad, what's 'incin-er-ate' mean?" he asked after a moment.

His dad laughed. "You've been talking to your mother again, I see." He scraped at the grill with his long-handled metal spatula, then flipped a hamburger. Grease sizzled in the fire.

"No, I haven't," Joey said, reaching for his *Fantastic Four* comic book. "She went shopping. What's it mean?"

"Burn, it means burn," Joey's dad said, distracted. "You know, like you do with trash to get it out of the way." He scraped another hamburger over and wiped at his forehead with the sleeve of his light cotton shirt. "Sure is a hot one, eh pardner? Perfect weather for a barbecue."

"Uh huh," Joey said, rolling over onto his stomach. He spread his comic book wide over the freshly-clipped grass and read about evil aliens for a few minutes. Then he flipped over on his back and gazed up at the hot blue and white sky.

"Dad, what's 'terra' mean?" he asked.

"Terra?" his dad said, drinking hard from a can of beer. "Why, that's Latin. It means land. You know, this stuff." He stomped on the ground with his Sunday sneakers, the black ones fringed with green from mowing.

"Oh," said Joey after a moment. "I mean 'terrans,' I guess. With a capital T."

Joey's dad lifted a hamburger off the grill and looked over at his son, confused. "What?"

Joey pointed silently at the cloud-spattered sky as the last letter settled into place.

The hamburger slid off the spatula and sizzled in the fire. 

Why I Hunt Flying Saucers

by Hugh Spencer
illustrated by Richard Bartrop

When I pull myself out of bed I notice that my slippers are missing. Obviously aliens are responsible. They have been disrupting my domestic routine for a few weeks now, presumably to observe my reactions.

I smell something in the hallway. Briefly, I wonder if they've been playing with the kitchen range, but then my still half-dormant brain tells me that the smoke is coming from the wrong end of the house. With trepidation, I poke my head out of the bedroom door and see the spitting embers of a dying campfire sitting in the bathtub. The aliens have also deposited a string of marshmallows, luncheon meats, wieners and beans along the hallway leading from the kitchen to the bathroom. The sticky brown sauce from the pork and beans has been mixed with some kind of gooey xenoplasmonic fluid; the mixture has soaked into the hallway carpet and the resulting mess looks incredibly difficult to clean. Damn those aliens.

Over a perfunctory breakfast I sip my tea and decide to call in some cleaners to deal with the second-encounter debris while I'm at work. Then I wonder, pointlessly I know, why have they done this to me? Is this some bizarre attempt to re-create some trivial moment from my boy scout days? Or some silly reference to humankind's origins as a hunting and gathering species?



Putting on my coat, I go out to the driveway where I notice the tell-tale brown streaks under the car. Nothing serious, just another oil leak. Undoubtedly another sign of extraterrestrial activity.

*

Driving to the office, I sight a formation of cigar-shaped lights drifting over the city. I seem to be the only one who notices their ships on a regular basis. As I coast into the parking garage I see a pair of bulbous obsidian-black eyes floating in my rear-view mirror. The alien's huge eyes are set over the tiny triangular face with the customary green skin. The image of the face lingers for a fraction of a second, then I only see the concrete and orange paint of the garage. I hypothesize that the alien may have been using some time/space warp device to gather a micro-second's worth of observations of my driving behavior. Who knows what information aliens think is important.

When these things first started happening to me I was terrified almost to the point of insanity. But lately I'm just feeling very, very put upon.

My morning at the office is reasonably uneventful. The aliens have decided to surround my desk with some kind of sensory distortion field which temporarily removes my colour vision and alters my sense of hearing. For about two and a half hours everybody sounds like Oswald the Duck or one of those damned chipmunks. But living inside a Max Fleischer cartoon doesn't keep me from making a few calls to the names on my client list. Actually their helium voices make some of the customers a little easier to take.

Sometime after coffee the distortion field dissipates and I decide that it is safe to go find some lunch. Not surprisingly, I'm not the most popular person at the office and therefore no one volunteers to join me. I suppose my co-workers don't enjoy finding themselves breathing through their ears or finding a mass of other-worldly tendrils squirming out of their quiche and salad.

But today I don't get to feel lonely. Once I reach the sidewalk I feel a strange upward breeze bite at my cheek. I turn and see a bright halo of celestial light descending around me. Once again I find myself inside an alien spacecraft.

And as usual I'm lying naked on a cold metal slab. A billion years ahead of us and these BEMS haven't learned how to build a comfortable examination table. I twist my head to the side and see a screen displaying a three-dimensional projection of one of my undoubtedly fascinating mucous membranes.

The spindly forms of the aliens float up to the ceiling of the chamber:

"Human, we mean you no harm . . ."

One of the aliens removes a long tube from the polished curved wall.

". . . just roll over onto your side and bring your knees up to your chest."

Great, another rectal probe.

I suppose it could be worse. Once they strapped me into a chair and stuck red-hot needles of light into my stomach and my skull. Another time they were taking secretion samples from my ears, nose and throat — it felt like they were pushing a lawn mower up my left nostril.

The absolute worst session was when they were taking spermatozoa specimens. I don't happen to find bug-eyed, bulb-headed E.T.s particularly sexually arousing, so they used this giant vacuum cleaner nozzle to generate the erection. They took 17 ejaculate samples. This was much less fun than you might imagine. Think ragged flesh.

So maybe just another rectal examination isn't so bad. Anyway, that's what I tell myself as I feel the cold metal of their probe push roughly through my anal sphincter.

*

I wake up on my living room couch. Two men dressed in black and wearing sunglasses sit across from me. The mirrored surfaces over their eyes make them look a little like aliens too.

"Are you conscious, now?" asks one of the men in black.

"Yes," I sigh.

I see the empty bottle and syringe sitting on the coffee table. Pentathol again. Their induced hypnotic trance is the only reason I am able to remember today's abduction.

The small man with a short blond crew-cut starts to pack his tape recorder into his briefcase:

"There doesn't seem to be any obvious physical damage or psychological aberration. It seems to be the typical scenario . . ."

The larger man, who has an even shorter blond crew-cut stands up:

". . . but we'd like you to stop by our offices in the next couple of days for a medical."

Just what I need, I think. Another examination.

Both men gather up their briefcases and walk toward the door.

"Don't bother to get up," the larger man says. "We've already contacted your office, and we gave your Mastercard number to the cleaners. I hope you don't mind, they had to put in a lot of work on the rug and they needed a deposit."

An irrational sense of propriety forces me to stand and follow the government agents to my door.

"Now don't put off the physical too long this time," the smaller man says. "There is the possibility that the aliens are slowly modifying your DNA and turning you into something . . ." he pauses as he considers the theory ". . . not quite human."

"Golly," I reply with little conviction.

"That's only one of the possibilities the Agency lab is playing around with," adds the larger man. "Some of the experts think that they may be using your body as a host medium for a fetal extra-terrestrial organism. Their examinations would be routine checks on the embryo's growth."

The larger man puts a solicitous hand on my shoulder: "You must prepare yourself for the possibility that this creature could rip its way out of your intestines at any time."

"Well." I'm silent for a moment, trying to think of something appropriate to say. "I really appreciate your concern."

I sound very tired.

The two men let themselves out onto the porch.

"Do you have any more of those 'Missing-Time-At-Work' forms?" I ask. "I'm just about out and my boss can't get his insurance claims processed if I don't submit within 48 hours."

"We left some on the kitchen table," says the larger man.

The smaller man takes something from inside his jacket pocket. He hands me a paperback edition of *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*.

"You look very tired, sir," he says with sincerity. "I wish you would let me send the missionaries over for a discussion. I know that a strong testimony of the revealed gospel of these latter days would be a great comfort to you."

"I appreciate your concern."

The larger man also hands me something. It is colourful leaflet.

"But in the meantime you might want to cheer yourself up by purchasing any one of our fine AmWay products."

"I appreciate . . ."

They walk to their car, a well-maintained AMC Hornet.

"Be sure to call me at home when you want to place orders," calls out the larger man as he opens the car door. "Don't place orders through my office."

"You can call me at home or the office," says the smaller man.

There is the sound of car doors slamming. The roar of an engine. And the men in black are gone.

The smaller agent's concern for my spiritual well-being must be overpowering since he seems to have forgotten that this is the third *Book of Mormon* he's given me. Walking toward the bedroom, I deposit his gift on the growing stack of latter-day religious literature on my bookshelf.

And true to its claims, the AmWay catalogue does indeed contain a startling range of useful, attractive and unique household bargains. Including an attractive and affordable digital clock radio with simulated plasti-wood finish. Which will come in handy because the beings from another world have decided to melt my bedside clock after I left for work. Damn aliens.

I spend the rest of the day in bed. I'm too tired to read and the aliens have also transformed my collection of Ridley Scott and James Cameron videos into highlights of a Spanish-language home-shopping channel. Aliens.

*

They come for me in the night. I don't know what time. Squat ugly creatures who look like a cross between hobbits and Armenian tailors. They lift me out of the bed and tear off my pajamas. Maybe they don't like the material.

Stumpy dwarf-fingers hold me like iron bonds as they lift me over their flat shoulders and carry me toward the smoky light of the space/time portal.

A telepathic message blasts through my mind:

"Do not be afraid, Human. We mean you no harm."

Where have I heard that one before?

"Okay, okay," I say weakly. I slide through the portal. The light runs like slimy electricity over my skin. "You know, I really could walk through this thing under my own power," I protest to the space-midgets.

If anything, they grip all the harder.

"Do not be afraid . . ."

Into the mothership we go.

*

We float upwards into the dome of the crystal cathedral. We are thousands of human specimens. Representatives of all races, cultures and ages of history.

The living glow of the crystalline structures suffuses our naked bodies and makes us perfect. We drift into a loose helix pattern as we turn toward a massive corridor that stretches out into infinity.

We see myriads of lifeforms of every conceivable configuration lining the inner walls of the enormous passageway.

Intuitively I sense that that we are facing the collective knowledge and experience of all intelligent life in the known universe: The Galactic Super-Culture.

Its god-like voice gently roars at us:

"BEAUTIFUL HUMANS! YOU ARE PRECIOUS AND RARE. WE WISH TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE YOU!"

Protect us? With rectal probes? I wonder. Besides, I feel a little overweight.

The Super-Culture articulates again:

"EVIL HUMANS! YOUR HIDEOUS AND VIOLENT NATURE MAY SOMEDAY GROW AND ENDANGER THE WHOLE UNIVERSE IF YOUR WAR-LIKE TENDENCIES ARE NOT CONTAINED!"

The whole universe? It seems unlikely to me. What risk is a bad attitude to your average black hole?

"WISE HUMANS! PROPERLY NURTURED, YOU WILL MATURE INTO THE LEADERS OF US ALL!"

Wise? I remember some of the products at the back of the AmWay catalogue.

"FOOLISH HUMANS! WE MUST PREVENT YOU FROM DESTROYING YOURSELF IN ATOMIC FLAME!"

Give me a break!

When I wake up, the mothership has vanished. The Super-Culture is gone. But I am still naked.

Naked, lying face down on my front lawn.

I estimate that is mid-afternoon. The telephone in my kitchen is ringing. I answer it by the third ring.

"This is the Chief Librarian," says the measured, rational voice at the other end of the line. "Your name was given us by a Mormon gentleman and

an AmWay representative. We have a book from our 00.0 stacks which you may find of interest."

*

I arrive at the Reference Section with no sign of alien activity. Perhaps invaders from another solar system hesitate to interfere with the operation of the Toronto Public Library System.

It has been a long time since I've been to a library. Or an art gallery, or a movie, or even a McDonald's. I fear public settings in general and I avoid places of learning in particular. I love libraries and museums, and the prospect of watching these storehouses of human reason and achievement get twisted around by some inexplicable alien prank is too depressing to contemplate.

But this time I was invited. And it just feels like the right thing to do.

The Chief Librarian looks pretty normal. She scans me carefully, decides how much authority she has to apply to contain any likely nonsense from a person of my height and weight, and then she speaks:

"You're the gentleman I spoke to earlier? Just remember that these are reference books. You can look at the books as long as you like inside the library." She narrows her eyes: "So don't even ask if you can borrow them."

She places a grey book in front of me. Then she hands me a pad of paper and a ballpoint pen.

"Most people who look at this book ask if they can use these."

She's right. The book contains much that is noteworthy. Its title is *Practical Steps for Coping with Unwanted Alien Encounters* and its author is a Louise Wallis. The dust jacket states that Wallis is a social worker who has "suffered over 300 alien abductions since the age of 15." The promotional copy also notes that "after developing these simple and easily mastered techniques, Louise Wallis has helped thousands to completely eliminate extraterrestrial influences in their personal lives."

Wallis is everything the desperate seeker of aid could ask for: she's perceptive, honest about what she knows and what she doesn't know, and she writes in easy to understand sentences. This is some of what she wrote:

"I formed a support group for people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens. Their stories were so vivid and expressed such humiliation that I never doubted their sincerity. And as we shared our experiences we gradually learned that each one of us was given a different reason for our degradation by our captors.

These horrific and ridiculous creatures would puncture our wombs with ice-cold needles, pierce our urinary tracts with razor-edged tubes and drill holes into our skulls — telling us that they had the right to perform these atrocities because the ozone layer was disappearing, or because our governments had

nuclear weapons, or because our race had ventured into outer space.

A common pattern in the early phases of the support groups was for abduction victims to try and convince themselves that the aliens were correct, and that these indignities can be justified as part of a higher purpose. But as we shared our grief and our anger, together we concluded that this belief was a delusion.

Every thinking person who has been abducted by alien beings must eventually face the same crucial question:

It must take tremendous technology and resources to travel across the galaxy to our world. Would intelligent and compassionate beings travel so far and at such cost, simply to confuse us and insert crude implements into our bodies?"

My hand is trembling. I have to stop writing for a moment. Wallis continues:

"It is undoubtedly true that an infinite universe holds many things that are beyond our current level of understanding. But to be rational, emotionally-stable people, we must base our attitudes and behavior on what we can understand and those things that we have experienced.

. . . if we believe what the aliens do and not what they say, we can only conclude that these creatures from beyond the solar system are raping and abusing us."

I look up from the page. The walls around me stand solid and unchanged. My left hand is pressed against the table, its heavy waxed top suggesting the stability and strength of its structure. At least for the time being I am safe.

I reach the next chapter:

"The support group sessions also had a number of constructive outcomes, including the mutual discovery that many of us had invented strategies and techniques for coping with unwanted alien appearances in our lives. Collectively, these means of coping represent a highly effective repertoire for anti-E.T. self-defense. Many of these strategies use everyday items from the home or the simplest industrial equipment and farm machinery. . ."

I start to take a lot of notes. Eventually I have to ask the Chief Librarian for another pad of paper.

I'm driving well over the speed limit. The jeep is my latest and most satisfying guilty pleasure. But it's just past six in the morning and on a northern Ontario highway there is very little risk of collision. Besides, my new toy was designed to be driven down empty roads at high velocities.

Since things have settled down for me, I've been a lot more productive in the office and the jeep was a reward to myself for some hard work.

My latest tape, *The Ventures in Space*, twangs from the stereo speakers. I remember a line from Wallis:

"Many aliens can be made severely uncomfortable by certain sounds or varieties of music."

Damn right. The little buggers really hate early sixties electric guitar groups or some of the more obscure British invasion bands like Herman's Hermits or the Zombies.

A few weeks after my trip to the library I caught some aliens stealing single socks from my drier and I toasted them with a blast of "Mrs. Brown You've Got a Lovely Daughter" from my portable tape player.

The aliens collapsed onto the basement floor, gasping out little silent "o's" with their lipless mouths and trying to keep their over-sized brains from leaking out their nostrils. Eventually they vanished into a cloud of red steam — just like dead Invaders from that old TV show.

Now the Ventures and early Floyd are my favourite groups.

The highway leads into a small river valley. I slow the jeep and park it at the side of the road. I turn off the stereo and roll down the window.

This feels like the right kind of place.

"Trust your instincts," writes Wallis. "The aliens are always trying to humiliate you, undermine your self-confidence. There is a reason for that; they don't want us acting on our feelings."

There's an odd texture to the air, like the taste of new metal and rotten eggs. I look up and see a mild distortion in the morning clouds.

This is definitely the right place.

I get out of the jeep and remove my packsack from the trunk.

"Many of these strategies use everyday items from the home or the simplest industrial equipment and farm machinery . . ."

First I put on the insulated work-gloves. Next, I open the hood of my jeep and connect the cable to the battery terminals.

I have my own theory about the aliens. It's based on a psychoanalyst who used to explain behavior in terms of informal "social games." Now, I can't prove this theory, but I like it: the aliens are playing a very silly, very sick game with us. Schlemiel and Schlemazl.

The schlemiel is like the sneaky, vaguely malevolent guest who goes around your house deliberately spilling things, embarrassing people and be-

ing a general pain in the ass to his host — the unwitting and vastly put upon schlemazl. The objective of the schlemiel is to force the confused schlemazl to both forgive all these pranks and feel guilty for getting upset in the first place.

The aliens land. They kidnap you. Then they tear off your clothes, jab you with hoses and needles and generally treat you like space junk. But it's okay, they say. You can forgive us and love us for all this because we have advanced intelligence, and because you have reactors, toxic waste, pay-tv, bad haircuts, etc. etc.

What's really disturbing is the fact that the schlemiel doesn't understand why he's doing all this bad shit to people. It's all pathological, compulsive behavior. Probably the result of some deep-rooted, star-spanning self-loathing. They need us to regularly reassure them of their superiority.

Damn aliens. They have some advanced technology. But they aren't very smart.

I hook the cable to the reel and lock the bolt into the crossbow. The thick gloves make it difficult to aim the weapon, but I manage to align the crosshairs just over the patch of slightly-wrong blue overhead. I pull the trigger and the bolt hurtles through the air, whisking the length of cable behind it. It's a good shot. The arc of falling cable neatly dissects the early morning sky.

There's a hard "click" that echoes through the river valley; the cable has connected with something invisible.

Suddenly a string of sparks races up the cable, and there's a beautiful multi-coloured explosion of electricity.

Its force-field ruptured, the flying saucer crashes into the valley.

I heft the bulky packsack over my shoulder and stride toward the smouldering metal shell. Without the field to maintain its structure, the saucer is already starting to disintegrate. So it only takes a little effort, and a pair of bolt-cutters, to force open the hatch.

Inside I see half a dozen aliens. They are either unconscious, or too disoriented to move. All of them are naked.

As I enter the main chamber I notice that one of them is twitching in a pod-like chair, others are crouched over streamlined control units, and one is sprawled face down on the slowly dissolving floor.

I open the packsack and look for the lubricant and the cattle-prod. ☹️

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SUDDEN DEATH OVERTIME

by Hazel Sangster
illustrated by James Long

"My name is Harvey, and I am a sportaholic."

The large man, muscles now run to fat, stared down at his paunch bulging under his green Rehab smock. Most of the audience were dressed identically to him, although in different colours. Rehab clients were all colour coordinated — green for sports, purple for hard drugs, blue for prescription drugs, yellow for alcohol, red for violence, brown for sex. Some were sporting an array of multi-coloured armbands indicating multiple-aholism. Harvey had a brown one.

The applause died and a voice shouted from the back of the auditorium. "Don't be ashamed of it, Harv — we're all aholics of one kind or another — that's why we're here."

"That's right, man," another voice chipped in. "Think of it as a disease, a social disease — not a personal weakness."

A tall woman dressed in the black and white all-in-one polyspandex uniform of New World Incorporated approached Harvey. She put a hand under his chin and made him look up. She made sure that the microphones were picking up her words and recording them for the files.

"You've taken the first step, Harvey. You've admitted your affliction. You'll always be a sportaholic — we can't cure you. But you're on your way

to controlling it. Now, go on — tell us all about it. Your honesty will not only help you, but other sportaholics."

Harvey smiled weakly. He scanned the audience until he found his wife, Marg, sandwiched between two nurses from the New World Incorporated Rehab Centre. She was either sad or mad — not good either way. She was next on the agenda.

"Well, it's like I said. The name's Harvey, and I'm a sportaholic. My Dad was one too — although back then they just called them jocks."

*

"Wakey, wakey, Harv! Rise and shine!" The small boy turned over in the bed and pulled the covers over his head. "Time for the young hockey star to get up for his 6:00 a.m. practice."

"Aw, Dad. Do I have to go? I'm real tired."

"Do you think the Great One got where he is missing practices? C'mon, son. You love it when you're there."

"Do not. Hockey's dumb. You're the one who wants. . ."

The father whipped the covers back and pulled roughly on the boy's arm. "Enough of that. Get up. It's a tough world out there — you gotta learn to fight for what you want. The competitive edge and discipline — that's what it's all about. Look at our premier. National Football player — and now look at him! Look at . . ."

"All right Dad, I'm coming. I'm coming. You don't have to give me the spiel. . ."

*

"My Dad liked 'em all — hockey, football, baseball, golf, basketball — he watched them on TV and I played 'em. Mind you, I'd be lying if I told you I was forced into it. Naw. I loved it. It was a way of life in our family — especially for my brother and me. I know Dad couldn't have come to every game of mine — but I always remember him being there. He had his first heart attack when we made it to the finals in Minor Hockey Week."

*

Putting on all that equipment changed those small boys. When they came straggling into the locker room dwarfed by their huge equipment bags, hustled along by anxious parents, they were just boys. Harvey still had his pajama trousers on, Billy the remains of an ink doodle on the back of a hand — and the coach had to remind them all to "take a leak before you get dressed." This was followed by a discussion of just how much pee your can could hold if you got really desperate.

But with all their equipment on, they were a different breed. Harvey's Mum had to don her glasses to check out the numbers on the back of the sweaters to make sure she was cheering for the right kid. And Harvey felt different too. Bigger, older, stronger — invincible.

*"We're so good — we're outa class
 Let's get out there 'n' kick some ass!
 Yeeaaaaa — Hawks!"*

They clustered around the goalie, fat Franco Broccoli, banging their sticks on the ground and Franco's pads before surging out onto the ice, while the Mothers retreated to the concession for coffee to see them through the upcoming hostilities.

*

Harvey smiled at the memory. He could almost feel the elastics of his equipment against his buttocks, smell the stale sweat from his hockey bag, hear the music of sticks and pucks against the rhythm of shouts and cheers and the occasional burst of a whistle or buzzer.

"Harvey? Continue, Harvey." The tall woman from New World Inc. was shaking his arm. "What about school? Didn't all those sports cut back on your study time, and show up in poor marks?"

Harvey started. The smile disappeared and he rubbed his hand over his balding head.

"Yeah — school. Sorry Ms. Mattson. Well, yes. I was no Einstein. I guess I'd have done better if I'd had more time — maybe. But it was cool to be a jock. You were a nerd if you were good at school — like Marty Hetherington. Now he was a classic nerd. He spent his recesses programming the school computer with new math games. He didn't play sports — not even at recess. He didn't collect the cards."

"I know a Marty Hetherington," interrupted someone from the audience. "He started at Levitsky, McBain and Akabutu the same year as I did — that's Levitsky, Hetherington, Akabutu now."

"You see, Harvey," said Ms. Mattson. "Your 'nerds' turned out to be the winners in life, and you and the other jocks, the losers."

I know that now, Ms. Mattson. But I didn't then." Harvey spoke through clenched teeth. "I was having fun; sports were good for you. Every day I read in the papers about my heroes renegotiating contracts for \$2 million a year. How was I to know. . ."

"There, there. Calm down, Harvey. We know you're not to blame." She turned to the audience. "Let's take a fifteen minute break, folks."

She hustled Harvey through the curtains at the back of the stage into a small room where she sat him down in what looked like an old-fashioned chair complete with hair dryer.

Harvey protested, but without conviction. "Just give me the meds — I don't need . . ."

"We're trying to help you, Harvey. Think of this as a booster shot," she said as she taped the electrodes to his temples.

There was no point fighting. After months of rehab Harvey knew that — it just made it worse. Ms. Mattson flicked through the selector mode, her

mouth pursed as she considered which tape would be most efficacious. Harvey hoped it might be the one about the lesbian hot tub parties on the tennis circuit, but he knew he only got that one by mistake. It had been fun until the libidometer sounded the overload alarm.

Ms. Mattson took off her previewacles. "This will really help you, Harvey. You're doing a great job out there — and we're all here to help you. You know that, don't you, Harvey?"

Harvey stared at an errant hair sprouting out of Ms. Mattson's chin. "Don't you, Harvey?" she repeated as she hit the control button to start the tape.

And then Ms. Mattson, the Public-aholic meeting, even the machinery whirring beside him, were all gone. Where was he this time? A locker room. A locker room — like any one of thousands that used to exist across the country. Rows of metal lockers, green paint peeling from the doors, graffiti scribbled on every available surface, the hollow clang of metal doors slamming, the companionable murmur of men's voices and the occasional burst of ribald laughter.

Hey! Wait a minute. What was that terrible smell? Harvey knew that smell from somewhere. Why was it so familiar? And then it hit him. Leon Koharchuk! It was one of Leon Koharchuk's world-famous farts, guaranteed to break up any huddle. Harvey was back in his High School football team locker room!

He rounded the corner and saw the rest of the team fanning their noses with towels. "Sorry, fellas," big Leon said sheepishly. "Just practising."

This was great! They were all there. Dwayne Dodswell trying to squeeze the pus out of an angry red pluke on his shoulder. "It's not ready yet, Dodswell," Smitty said. "You've got to wait till it's got a yellow head."

"A yellow head?" Chuck Martin jumped over the benches to get to Dwayne. "Let me do it. I love squeezing plukes. Marcia had a real crop on her back when I was over at her place last weekend. She took off her angora sweater and let me squeeze them all while the Jets massacred the Giants on the tube. What a turn-on!"

"Huhu hugga hugga hugga! So how'd you make out, then Chuck. Get past the scrimmage? Did you score, man?"

"Did I score? Listen to this. We started off in a *huddle* — she called a few *holding violations* so I *backed off* to the *50-yard line* before moving in where I managed to sneak a couple of *illegal procedures* by her."

By this time, the whole team was gathered around Chuck, who was sitting splay-legged on the bench, his pants off and his teeth out. Dwayne was still fingering the spot on his back. Harvey could feel the goose bumps on Dwayne's hairy buttocks against his bare thigh as he pressed forward to hear Chuck's story.

"She was still sitting on the sofa but I pulled a *spiral* on her and *split the uprights* to *turn-in* for the *spike*. She called a *two-minute warning* on me and

asked for a *time-out*, but I rallied with a *power block* and a *screen pass* down her *shank*. She presented a *tight end* and accused me of *unsportsmanlike behaviour* and *roughing*, but I responded with a *pass rush* to *hit the hole* for a *down-and-in penetration*."

"What a play!" "Touchdown!" "Talk about *bump and run*!" "Like that *three-point stance*!" "How 'bout a *gang tackle* next weekend, Chuck?" "Can I get in on an *interception*?"

The bell on Harvey's libidometer and the computapulse siren both sounded at the same time. Immediately, Harvey was upended in his chair, enabling the mechanical arms to do their worst. His eyes darted from side to side as the stainless steel pincers advanced remorselessly and plucked out, one at a time, his nose hairs.

*

Harvey's eyes were still running when he stood up again in front of the aholics.

"I'm sure we're all ready to carry on after our little break," Ms. Mattson purred. "Harvey is, I know. Tell us what happened at school and college, Harvey. Listen to this, folks. This horrible story is just one of the reasons why New World Inc. made the wise decision to ban all sports."

"I was really into sports in High School and College. I had to have it every day. It became the most important thing in my life. My coach replaced my parents, and my team-mates were my family. By this time I was kinda concentrating on football. I won a football scholarship to UBC."

"And what happened there, Harvey?"

"We won the Vanier Cup two years in a row. It was the best two years of my life. Marg and I got married — she was on the cheerleading . . ."

"Harvey . . ." Ms. Mattson's voice overrode Harvey's. The room darkened, and a screen slid down behind Harvey. "Turn around, Harvey, and tell us what you see."

Harvey turned around slowly and spoke softly. "That's me in the first year . . . and that's me at the end of my second year." The screen had cut from a smiling photograph of a slim young man, to a heavily muscled individual, livid acne over his face, glowering at the camera.

"Yeah — I know. That was dumb. Things did get a bit out of hand, I guess."

*

Harvey slouched in the recliner in front of the TV. He ached all over — and they'd lost the game. He scratched at the acne on his face and hollered for Marg to bring him another beer. He flipped the channels; nothing but some goddammed war in some goddammed banana republic that no one gives a shit about.

"Right now it's a 3-3 game, despite a heavy Government Forces *shooting advantage* over the Rebels. Guts and cunning on the Rebel side have *intercepted*

a few potentially lethal *plays* initiated by the Government. But if they go into *sudden death overtime* — and it looks like that right now — experts like Brigadier General Earl Quayle III, Retired, predict a vicious *ground drive* into the Rebel *end zones*, followed by crushing *power play aerial support*. The rebels may *counter* with a few local *chicken fights*, but it looks as though they're *down and out*. A dirty end to a *confrontation* that's been fought with no *referee* to call the *penalties* and has been fraught with *Geneva code infractions*."

*

"It was Marg who got me away from steroids . . . and football. She saved my life — she got me back into hock . . ."

The lights came back on suddenly as Ms. Mattson interrupted. "A truly chilling story, folks. A horror story of the world as it was in the unenlightened past and how it could be again without our unending vigilance."

Prompted by the Rehab staff, the audience began to applaud.

"So you quit football and married Marg," Ms. Mattson continued. "What happened then, Harvey?"

Harvey rubbed his eyes as he stared at Marg in the audience. She was slumped over, her head in her hands.

"Marg and I got married, as you said. I took a job at Cross-Country Haulers. Marg had already finished her nursing training. The first few months the only sport I wanted was with Marg," Harvey guffawed apologetically, but the audience didn't even blink, and Marg didn't look up. "But then I began to want something more. We both did. So I joined a recreational hockey club, and Marg took up bowling. In the winter we curled. In the summer we'd play softball, travelling around to inter-club tournaments. And a few years later we took up golf. It was a fine life."

Ms. Mattson glared at Harvey, who was standing with a happy smile on his face. "Not for long, though, Harvey. What happened in the year 1999?"

Harvey sighed. "Yes, 1999. Yes, right. 1999 was the year the Revisionist Party took over with an overwhelming majority. One of the first bills to pass was the ban on sports.

■

"We'll just have to go underground."

"Yeah, we can't stop playing."

"This can't last — it'll probably only be a coupla years till sports are back on top of the priority list."

"It'll cost — building and concealing a hockey rink underground — security — manufacturing all our own equipment.."

"No cost is too high. . ."

"Right on."

*

"1999 was also the year we adopted Harvey Junior," Harvey said quietly.

"Tell us your reasons for adopting a child, Harvey, and speak up — the

folks at the back of the hall can't hear you," ordered Ms. Mattson.

"Well, we couldn't have kids of our own."

"Why, Harvey. Why not?"

Harvey mumbled something.

"Louder, Harvey. Speak louder."

"BECAUSE I'D BEEN TAKING STEROIDS," Harvey yelled. "You already know that."

*

"What's wrong with this kid, Marg?" Harvey asked. "All he does is read. I hid this little bat and ball away for him all these years, and he's just not interested."

"Well, he is adopted, Harv," Marg lowered her voice. "And there aren't any sports for him to watch or read about."

"Yeah, you're right. The only thing I *did* read as a kid was *Sports Illustrated*, the Stats page, and the back of my hockey cards."

*

"And what is Harvey Junior's opinion of sport today?" Ms. Mattson asked.

"You already know that," Harvey growled.

"But the audience doesn't, Harvey."

"Then why don't you tell them, Ms. Mattson?" said Harvey through clenched teeth.

"Do you think we should take another little break, Harvey?" Ms. Mattson asked softly, covering the mike with her hand. "Or are you ready to answer the question?"

Harvey turned to the microphone and began to speak in a monotone.

"We decided early on that we wouldn't tell Harvey Junior about our sports habits. He was a sensitive boy and always listened attentively to the propa . . . er, information . . . on the hazards of sports. He was brought up in a sportless environment. He was a model student, put in way over the required weekly hours in front of the television and interactive video — a smart boy. So it didn't take him long to figure out what Marg and I were doing three nights a week."

*

Harvey Junior was staring intently at the interactive video screen. He had already reached the third stage of the Productivity Game and had been promoted to Vice-President Sales. Amazing for a child of ten. Thick-lensed glasses dwarfed his pale face as he stared at the screen flickering before him.

The door opened and his parents came in, both carrying large nylon bags. "We're off now, Junior. Don't wait up for us."

"You're always going out. Where do you go?"

"Oh . . . just over to Alec's/the Incorporium to watch the vid/stock up on vitamins," Harvey and Marg both spoke at once.

"Why can't you watch it here? You're supposed to be in bed by ten."

"Don't worry, son. We won't get into any trouble. We won't be late."

"You always say that," whined Harvey Junior.

*

"Harvey Junior followed us one day," Harvey told the Rehab audience. "He followed me to the Hawks Hideout — our newly finished underground arena, and watched as we beat the Kings 4-1. The next week he followed Marg to the Bowlarama Bunker. Then he came home and phoned the toll-free number advertised on the vid, and turned us in."

Ms. Mattson stood up and began to applaud, and the audience started clapping too. "What a brave and wise little boy," said Ms. Mattson as the clapping died down. "And that was the beginning of your salvation, Harvey . . ."

A commotion at the back of the hall interrupted Ms. Mattson's speech. The doors burst open and several men ran into the hall. They were wearing an assortment of old hockey sweaters and brandishing home-made sticks. It was the Northtown Hawks — Harvey's old team, riding to his rescue down the centre aisle of the Rehab Hall!

They surged onto the stage led by big Marty Mahoney, who knocked the mike and podium off the stage, pulled an oversize Hawks sweater over Harvey's head, and pressed the worn handle of a hockey stick into his hand.

"Come on, Harvey — your old position — we're counting on you, man."

As in a dream, Harvey moved to centre ice. A skinny little guy in the third row of the audience suddenly stood up and began to climb over the rows of people in front of him. "I'll drop the puck — let me be the ref. Please let me ref. I've always wanted to drop the puck . . ."

And the game began. The audience, who had been sitting open mouthed, gave a kind of collective sigh, and lent forward in their seats.

"Na, na, na, na . . . Na, na, na, na . . ." then the hands took up the chant. "Let's go, Hawks!"

Suddenly Marg jumped up and yelled, "Go, Hawks, Go!" She pushed past the Rehab nurse and ran up to the stage, retrieving the mike as she went.

"It's Mahoney . . . passes to McPherson — and back to Seminiuk . . . intercepted by Mercer . . . a pass to Robinson, back to Mercer — backhand to Harvey — he **SCORES!**"

Harvey circled the stage, his right arm whirling in the traditional gesture of the pinnacle of sporting or sexual achievement. The crowd erupted in a wave of applause as the players thumped into Harvey, pummelling him on the back, rubbing his bald spot, whacking him on the bum with their sticks.

Nobody noticed Ms. Mattson. Recovered from her shock, she was talking on the portable phone that she always wore on her belt. She put it back into its holster as the doors burst open once again, and a Clean-Up battalion of World Incorporated Inc. charged into the room, lasers at the ready.

Big Marty Mahoney watched them vault onto the stage with a glint in his

eye. In a flash, the stick was down, the gloves off and he charged into the fray with an ear-splitting war whoop. The rest of the team didn't need any encouragement. The crowd went wild. "Giv'im one for me, Marty." "Take 'em out, boys."

With one deft movement, Harvey rescued Ms. Mattson from the brawl by grasping her by the scruff of her black and white striped shirt, and dumping her in the lap of a wildly cheering octagenarian in the front row.

But the fists of the Hawks were no match for the lasers of the Clean-up Crew. Within minutes, all was silent in the auditorium. Ten motionless bodies lay on the stage. Marg lay slumped against the podium, the mike still in her hand. Someone in the audience threw up. The Clean-up Crew were shaking the detractable brooms from the other end of their lasers when it happened.

There was a kind of *pwff* — like a light bulb burning out, and Harvey stood up again. But he was twice his usual size. Shoulders of rock, thighs of steel, he was dressed in a magnificent white and gold hockey uniform. The blades of his skates flashed in the light that was growing behind him. It grew brighter and brighter and the sound of an organ playing a medley of National Anthems, nursery rhymes and popular hymns filled the auditorium. As the light brightened, it began to swirl, creating the impression of a tunnel.

At the end of the tunnel, silhouetted against a neon scoreboard, a tall slim figure beckoned to Harvey. As if on wheels, Harvey moved into the tunnel. As he got closer, the light illuminated the figure — a young man with pale, thin hair and a very feeble-looking beard, dressed in black and silver robes. He punched Harvey on the arm and tapped him on the shins with his wooden sceptre. The two of them turned, and walked away. At the end of the tunnel they paused and turned, and the young man began to speak in a high-pitched, rather nasal voice.

"Tonight, we break tradition. Tonight, even the legendary St. Cherry would not be able to choose the three stars. Tonight and forever, each and every member of the Northtown Hawks is a star!"

At that, the figures on the stage sort of floated up from the ground, and with glazed expressions and sticks raised, they stumbled into the tunnel. The Clean-up Crew, the audience and Ms. Mattson watched, immobilized.

As they disappeared into the light, the organ reached a final, climactic crescendo and the light tunnel shrank around the two remaining figures, now seated atop a silver Zamboni, until it was just a spotlight on their receding backs. Before it faded, it pinpointed Harvey's name spelled out in fluorescent letters on his heavenly sweater, and on the back of the man leading him into the light — #99 sparkling in artificial ice chips. ●

Much Slower than Light

by Carolyn Clink

I am Newtonian.
My frame of reference
is my frame of preference.

A pox on your twin paradox
and your atomic clocks.

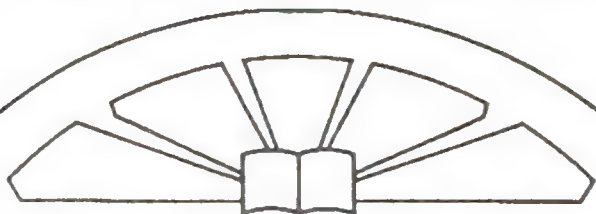
It's too much of a bother
being my own grandfather.
I'll just stay home and wait
in my own steady state. ☐



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At My Chamber Door

by Allan Goodall

illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen

*While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—*

Only this and nothing more."

"The Raven," Edgar Allan Poe

I'd like to string the inventor of the woofer up by his toenails. Preferably suspended over an alligator pit.

For the guy upstairs, I have other plans. Sinister plans. *Nasty* plans. Plans involving honey-coated genitals and jungle-sized fire ants.

These are not the thoughts of a sane individual as he peacefully awakens from a restful slumber but, then again, I'm not a wholly sane individual, I was not peacefully awakened, nor was my slumber all that restful. Strike three, I'm out.

It's bad enough having to get up at the crack of noon on a work day, but forcing a man out of bed on his day off? That's cruel and inhuman punishment. I mean the sun had hardly poked through the smog layer, for God's sake. And, to top it off, I had a hangover.

A monotonous beat was shaking my bedroom. Thirty hertz, I think. Maybe forty. But loud. I wonder what the resonant frequency of a hangover is? What ever it was, the music from upstairs was close. A new plan formed in my bruised brain, this one involving wooden mallets and twelve inch spikes. And the same honey-coated genitals.

Somehow I managed to crawl into the living room. Either the hangover had left me weakened, or the floor was shaking. Or both. I almost banged my head on the blast wall, which in my condition would have probably led to suicide. Touching the control pad, I opaqued the windows — the last thing I needed was a faint tendril of sunlight to hit me square in the eyeballs. Finally I reached the phone and punched in the number for the guy upstairs. I knew it by heart.

He's a member of one of those thrash/gospel groups, Gregorian Chantz I think, or maybe St. John and the Basilicas. For the last month he was out on tour, or off cutting an album, or something. I guess he got home this morning. That's all I need, an entire summer of being shocked out of bed by the guitar solo from "Onward Christian Soldiers."

It brings new meaning to the term "Jesus wept."

He picked it up on the fifth ring. Either he's got it hooked up to a strobe light or the guy's psychic. His haggard face and unkempt hair filled the viewer. "Hello?" The background noise almost drowned him out.

"It's me. Al, from downstairs! Turn down that damned racket!" Okay, so "damned" was technically incorrect. Sue me.

"What?" he yelled in reply.

"I said, turn down the music!"

"What??"

Several minutes of similar conversation ensued, resulting in him eventually dropping the noise below one hundred decibels. I'd really like to do unto him what he's done unto others, but I think he's bought off the board of directors for this residential block. I'm not naming names but the last time I complained, all I got on the trivee was three straight weeks of Rabbi Joseph Roberts and His Holy Crusade. Another week of Judeo-Baptist sermons and I'd have taken out a fast food joint with a plasma rifle, all in the name of the Lord and good taste. Besides, most of the time he's out of the apartment. Just once, though, I'd like to get even.

The doorbell rang. I stood perfectly still, sweat beading on my forehead. Adrenalin is apparently a good cure for a hangover, as my mind started to clear. Adrenalin or terror, one of the two. The distant drumming receded into the walls. My heartbeat had taken its place, just as loud and almost as fast.

Please, God, don't let it be the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The doorbell rang again. A woman's voice came over the door speaker. "Albert, dear. It's your mother."

Mother? I had to think fast. Was she due today? What day was it, any-

way? I had to think. "Albert, are you home?"

It sure sounded like Ma, but that was no guarantee. Those Jo-Ho's are a clever bunch. But I couldn't leave her in the hall if it *was* her. "Yeah, I'm home."

"Oh, good. It's so nice to hear your voice. You never phone any more. Can I come in? This hallway's a mess. Why don't you find a nice girl and move to the suburbs? At least you can breathe the air in the suburbs."

It definitely *sounded* like her. "Hold on a sec, Ma. You know the drill."

Mother — if that's who it was — sighed. "Do we have to go through that silly routine? Really, Albert, living in the city has made you paranoid."

"You know we have to do this, Ma. Now, what's your sister's name?"

Another sigh. "Clara."

"And her dog's name?"

"Rufus."

This went on for a couple of minutes. All the answers were correct, but there was still something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Maybe she protested too much between questions. Maybe she didn't protest *enough* between questions. Whatever it was, I had one final test.

"Now can I come in, dear? My feet are sore."

"Just one more question, Ma." I took a deep breath. "What was the first non-American team to win the World Series?"

"Mother" paused. "You've never asked me that before. What's the matter, Albert? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Just answer the question, Ma. What was the first non-American team to win the World Series?"

Another pause. "Umm, now let me think now. It was one of those foreign teams, wasn't it? Uh, um, wasn't it the Vancouver Expos? Yes, that's who it was."

Cold sweat ran down my back. I turned quickly and vaulted for the blast shield. Of course it was Vancouver. They beat Tokyo 3 to 1. Everyone knows it was Vancouver. Everyone but my mother. Ma knows squat about baseball.

This one was good. He could sense something was wrong. Maybe it was the yelp of pain I let out as my knee caught the edge of the blast wall. There was a squeal and an implosion of air as the middle of the reinforced door turned red hot and the hinges started to buckle. Another squeal and the hinges gave way just as the centre of the door evaporated in a shower of sparks. Plasma splashed the blast shield and burned holes in the walls and carpet. Building maintenance was going to be pissed.

I grabbed the autogun at my feet and levelled it over the lip of the cooling blast shield, just as a bulky figure entered the apartment. The intruder was encased in layers of body armour. Articulated panels of ceramic composite covered the intruder from head to toe and a visor hid his features. Reactive armour covered the intruder's torso, front and back, adding another layer of

protection, while a laser-ablative cloth covered most of the suit. I could tell this one was a pro.

"Good afternoon," said the intruder. "Let me introduce myself." I fired the autogun, cutting him off in mid speech. The high-velocity squash-head rounds hit the ceramic composite helmet and flattened as they bounced off. There was no chance of the slugs actually penetrating but that's okay, they weren't supposed to. Instead, the first two rounds knocked the intruder off balance and the next five sent the heavily protected figure reeling backwards.

One shot hit the reactive armour and triggered a shaped charge. Great against mini-missiles, reactive armour was worse than useless against slugs and added to the intruder's backwards momentum. Sometimes the low tech solution was the best.

I emptied the magazine into the intruder's torso. Finally knocked off his feet, the intruder fell backwards into the wall across from my apartment. The wall must have been weakened by the plasma gun's backblast because the intruder fell through the wall and into my neighbour's bath tub. Unfortunately my neighbour was bathing his mastiff at the time. The result was a wet tangle of dog, neighbour, intruder, plastisteel chunks, plaster dust, and shredded ablative covering.

I dropped the empty gun onto the floor and ran for the fire escape, grabbing a re-breather on the way. I keep a missile carbine by the escape in case of emergencies and this certainly qualified. I slipped the re-breather over my face and, gun in hand, jumped into the drop chute.

The chute accelerated me at 2 g's until I was half way down the building. At that point I began to decelerate. Lucky for me, I hadn't eaten. The last couple of rings in the drop chute must have been shot because I hit the pavement at the bottom at something greater than the prescribed two metres per second. For this I pay maintenance fees.

I rolled my bruised body into a squatting position and for the first time I realized I was still in my pyjamas. Cradling the carbine in my hands, I peered through the murky atmosphere around me. A copbot hovered in front of me.

"Oh, hello!" called the mechanical voice. Somebody in the police psychology department came to the conclusion that Mickey Mouse's voice would be perfect for bringing trust and a calming influence into a heated situation, and thus fitted the copbot fleet accordingly. Little did they know that most people detest the little rat. "Unauthorized use of a drop chute is illegal and punishable by death," stated the bot in that cute little rodent voice. "You have five seconds to record your epitaph."

Inevitably, I came to the conclusion that artificial intelligence is an oxymoron. I fired a missile at the bot's gun arm, shearing it away at the mounting joint.

As the arm clattered to the ground behind it, the copbot spoke again. "Oh,

my! Unauthorized destruction of a copbot is illegal and punishable by . . ." I fired a missile through the bot's brain. It was a good thing this was an older model. Ever since the Niven Statutes were put in place, half the laws on the books are punishable by summary execution — followed by a quick trip to the body bank with the usable remains. The newer bots are a little quicker on the trigger.

I could hear the whine of the drop chute behind me. Guess who? I could try taking him out as he hit the ground but his reactive armour was designed to stop my mini-missiles. Deciding that discretion is most definitely the better part of valour — and ignoring the pain in my legs — I took off around the corner and into an alley.

One of the most amazing things about life in the big city is the speed with which structures can be erected or modified. Take this alley, for instance. A week ago, this was a space between two stratoscrapers wide enough to drive a hovervan through. Today, it's a short *cul de sac* resulting from the widening of our neighbouring building. Of course, not knowing this, I ran head first into the wall at top speed. Mother always told me to look where I was going, but who ever listens to their mother?

The next thing I noticed, I was lying on my back on the pavement. I must have cracked the re-breather in the impact, as noxious odours were beginning to leak through to my nose. As my eyes refocused I noticed the intruder standing above me. Reflexes took over and I groped for the carbine.

He was standing on it.

As I settled back down, he flipped up his visor. There was precious little left of his ablative coating, most of it having been shredded by the explosions of the reactive armour. Green ceramic framed his face and a smile of putrid satisfaction, barely noticeable beneath his re-breather, spread across it. A scar running from his right eye to the corner of his mouth told me he had done this sort of thing before. He levelled his gun down at me.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Herbert J. Plink, and I represent . . ."

I was in no mood for this crap. "Look, I know my rights. You got me fair and square. Now cut the crap and get to the heart of the matter. What are you selling?"

A small pout crossed his face like that of a wounded puppy. A real *ugly* wounded puppy. After all, the spiel was traditional. "These," he said. He pulled out his sample. "Fuller Brushes."

Damned Niven Statutes. If I had reduced him to smouldering slag I'd be safe. But no, not me, I had to turn tail and run. "All right, I'll take one." That hurt look on his face intensified. I started to gag. "Okay, okay, make it two."

The salesman beamed as I stood up. At least he was selling something useful. The last time a salesman came to my door I got stuck with a load of tampons. "I guess you must be just raking in the bucks."

"Naw, not really," he replied, as he sent in my order to the host mainframe. "Oh, it pays the bills, but this is just a sideline. I'm actually an accountant."

This surprised me. I suppose accountants have to find excitement in their life any way they can. "Even so, if they can't blow you away first, the choice is the spiel or certain death. You can't get many refusals."

"You'd be surprised. It was a real bitch selling insurance."

He gave me my receipt and told me when my order would arrive. Of course my bank balance had already been debited. At least my name was flagged on the mainframe. That should keep me safe for a week or two.

The salesman shook my hand, handed me my gun, closed down his visor, and walked away. In spite of his demeanour, he seemed to be a nice guy. Not like those sadistic bastards that sell vacuum cleaners — they just love to show off their special attachments.

The salesman stopped and turned back around. "Say, you wouldn't know anyone else that might be interested in buying a brush, would you?"

I couldn't put someone I knew through that terror. I wouldn't be able to live with myself. In these trying times, one must have at least a shred of humanity.

A total stranger, however, was a different matter.

"Try the guy in the apartment above me. Hell, I'll bet he buys five of those things."

"You think so?"


"Sure. He's loaded. In fact he's home right now."

That ugly dog smile spread across his face, again, only this time it was different, almost angelic. "I'll go right up there."

"Be careful, though. The guy's a tough nut to crack."

"Don't worry," he replied, patting a fusion grenade, "I'm ready for him."

I sat myself back down on the ground and, for the first time today, a smile spread across *my* face. "I'm counting on it." ☺



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The Dark Terror of Fifi

by A.J. Axline

“*I* love myself,” Janine whispered. . . and she began to change.

Coarse black fur sprouted from her flesh. Her joints unknotted and reformed. The sounds of cracking bone and popping gristle filled her floppy ears. Her body dimensions shrank. Her newly-grown fur puffed out around her legs, her waist, her tail.

Soon the change was complete.

She drew herself to her paws and pranced over to the vanity mirrors. She saw herself and panted gleefully. She circled around and around, preening shamelessly.

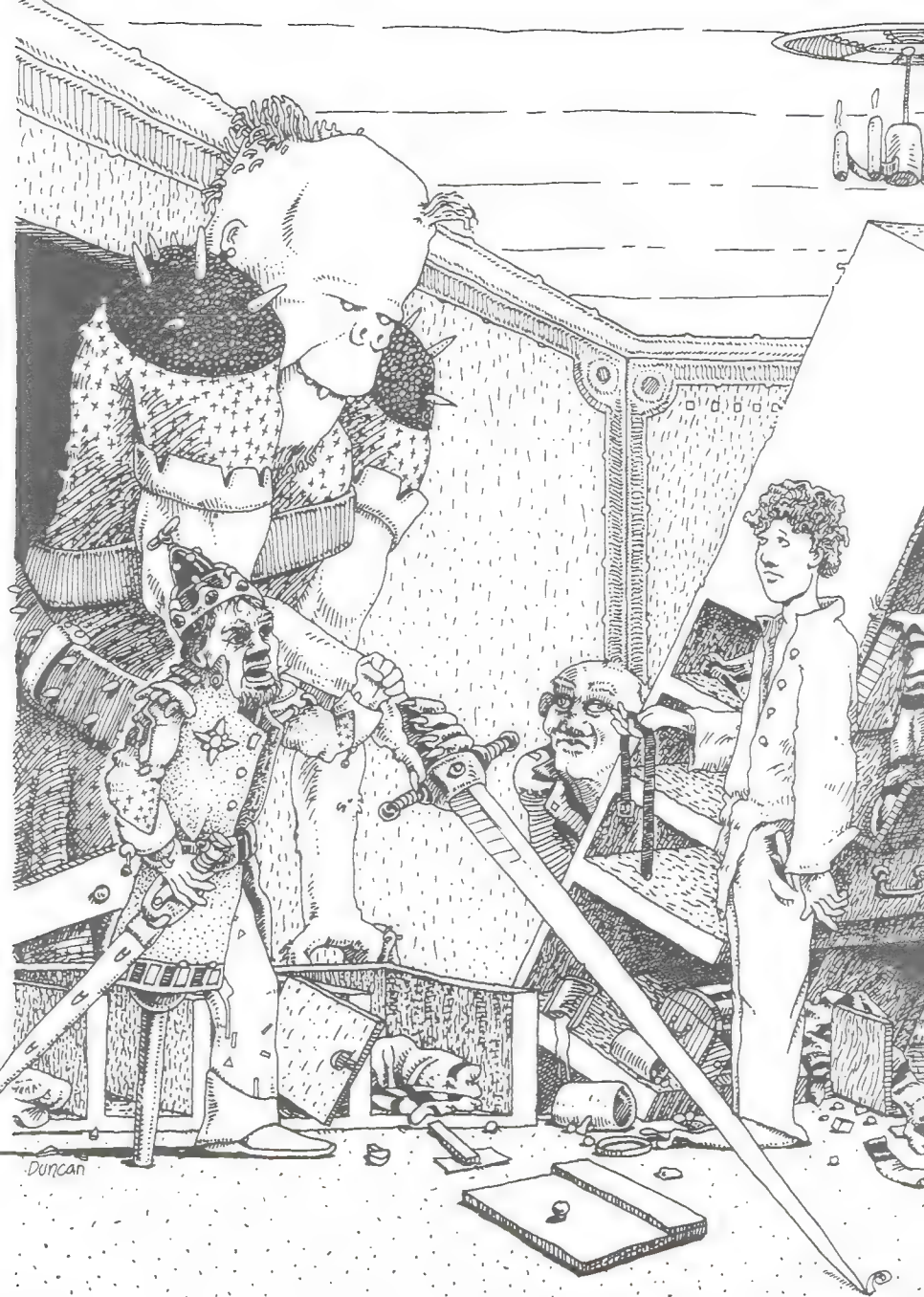
She was beautiful. So beautiful.

Gathering her supernatural strength she padded over to the open terrace, and leapt skywards. She fell thirty five feet, her lithe body landing neatly on the ground below. Panting wildly, she ran across the estate grounds until she reached the boundary hedge.

Janine no longer existed. She was now. . . Fifi.

Fifi, black creature of the night, who lusted for blood and the taste of meat.

The Werepoodle jumped the fifteen-foot hedge and bounded into the night, yipping wildly at a terrified city. 



"I'll not have folk call my son a coward!"

Once a Knight is Enough

by Beth Fogliatti

illustrated by Duncan Wells

It was going to take a team of wild griffins to loosen my hold on the dresser.

Not that I normally spend my evenings clinging to furniture; this was strictly a new experience, and one that I was determined to make last. I gazed up at Karl, my estwhile trainer and sometime valet, wondering which would last longer: my grip or his patience. When Karl lost his temper he tended to stalk down the castle corridors, mumbling threateningly.

Not that I was worried he might actually talk me into it; I knew that with my usual persuasiveness and flawless logic I could convince him of the error of his ways.

And, if I could just get him wandering the halls I would gain at least a twenty minute head start.

"Be reasonable, Quinn. It's not like this was unexpected." Karl never did know when to give up. "Tradition, after all, is . . ."

". . . what keeps the population down and the griffins fed." I tightened my grip on the dresser. "If it's Tradition to get yourself chopped into *hors d'oeuvres* and used for dragon bait, I'd rather play with the moat monsters!"

Karl straightened to his full five feet and looked indignant. No great feat; Karl was cursed with the face of a constipated gopher. "Young Master, as you are becoming a man of sixteen on the morrow, you are bound by the legacy of Clan Callis to go forth unto a Quest of Daring and Courage, thereby proving your Worth to enter the Distinguished Ranks of the Knights of Callis and—*will you stop that!*"

He should know better; I always mimic him when he starts talking in Capitals. "Only if you'll stop trying to convince me that there's anything noble about early extinction."

"Young Master, I hasten to remind you that the men of Castle Callis have

always distinguished themselves through Great Acts."

"Extinguished is more like it."

"Why, your own father led the Quest for the Chalice of Nuhn!"

"Which explains the wooden leg. Karl, I've already told you: I'm not going on some cock-eyed quest just so I can be a martyr in my own time."

Karl managed to look even more put out. "I never realized young Sir was a coward."

I looked up at him; at his five-foot-nothing. I'm sure he found it a new experience. "Coward isn't the right word. Let's just say I have this excellent sense of self-preservation."

"Nonetheless, it has been ordained by your father himself that you shall lead the Quest for the Broken Blade of Orr."

"Or what?"

He looked confused; with Karl, this was by far his most intelligent expression. I was about to try again when, right on cue, the door to my room burst open. Blocking the doorway, knuckles dragging on the floor, was Father's favourite goon — sort of a cross between a gorilla and a Gorgon that had washed its face and slept badly on it. It idly swung a broadsword easily twice my size as it drooled amicably at me. Peering out from behind it, about waist height, was Father.

"Or, my lad, you deal with me!" he roared.

Now, you've got to understand that when I say "roared," I mean "sort of squeaked loudly but really meant to roar if only he could get worked up enough about something worth roaring about." Not that I mean to imply that Father was a coward. On the contrary; as Karl said, he was renowned far and wide for leading the great quest for the Chalice of Nuhn, a journey that did, indeed, cost him his left leg. What *wasn't* general knowledge was that he had lost the leg when he was run over by a pigherder's wagon as he lay in the street in a drunken doze. He had been celebrating, you see, having just found the Chalice after many a perilous battle against horrendous odds. (Actually, the whole trip consisted of a rather pleasant ride to Castle Nuhn, where Father borrowed a cup of sugar and a chalice to hold it in. I heard the whole story from one of his not-all-that-faithful retainers — one who felt the story was just too good to remain untold.)

He glared up at me with his one good eye (the other tended to wander off, making you wonder what was looming over your shoulder). "I'll not have folk call my son a coward!" he bellowed. "On the morrow you leave with Gilster the Pure to search for the Blade."

I opened my mouth to give a really good reason why I simply couldn't make it this week, maybe some other time, but before I could say a word Father's pet orangutan raised his sword high and cut the dresser neatly in half.

Father smiled gently. "Any questions?"

Now how could I turn down dear old Voice of Doom?

*

The next morning dawned bright and clear, the most depressing start to a quest I had ever seen.

I was not in what you would call a great mood. It seemed that Father had decided that he didn't trust me as far as he could throw the drawbridge. This had occasioned him to set guards outside my door for the night, with orders to "not let him out of your sight." This lack of faith would have been painful enough to bear without the added embarrassment of being found crawling up the chimney at three a.m., and the indignity of the guards not believing that I was merely chasing away a very persistent bat.

I looked around at my fellow questers as we loaded down the horses in the castle courtyard. Gilster, Father's chief bladesman, sat looking noble on a magnificent white stallion. Trust Father to send Mr. "Knighthood In Full Flower" along to keep an eye on his son. Beside him, his squires Kelli and Brahn slouched in their saddles, managing to look both bored and nervous at the same time. The rest of the group consisted of a dozen or so retainers, all mounted on what were supposedly the best Royal Nags available. From the looks of some of them, we'd be doing a lot of walking before long.

Karl raised his banner in the Traditional Farewell Wave. It was time to be off.

I could see Father winding up for one of his Proud and Stirring Farewell Speeches. I groaned inwardly, not sure that I could stomach another lecture on Knightly Duty. I decided to cut him off before he could start.

"Farewell, Father. Good luck at your landowner's meeting today. Give my regards to your fellow despots."

He frowned. "Landowner's meeting? Was that today?"

"Of course. Second Tuesday of the month." I suppose there isn't much honour in lying to someone who never grasped the concept that one year = twelve months, but what the heck — the situation was desperate. I saw Gilster start to open his mouth, then shut it again when I gave him a look that would make a gargoyle run for cover. After all, he had been subjected to Father's speeches before. Maybe he'd figure he owed me one.

Father looked uncomfortable; he *hated* to be late. "Least I could do for my eldest son." He frowned, looked at the clear sky. "Looks like it might rain again. Well, I know how eager you are to be off, so I won't keep you. Stay well and, uh . . ."

"Bring back the Blade?" I prompted.

He beamed. "Exactly. Bring back the Blade." He gave one last look at the sky and started to back away. "Yes, best be off before it starts. You know these summer storms, on you in a flash." He backed into Karl, who gave an indignant squawk and tumbled headfirst into a watering trough. I grinned and turned away; so much for farewell speeches. We led our horses into the forest.

As if on cue, as soon as we got out of sight of the castle I heard the distant rumble of thunder. I sighed; it promised to be a damp quest.

Karl had tried to force-feed me details on this Blade the night before, but for all his talking he didn't really have much to say — not an unusual occurrence. The only thing I knew about this blade was that it was supposed to have been cracked by a Knight of Orr while trying to separate a particularly tough dragon from his head. The aforesaid dragon didn't take this very well, understandably, and promptly roasted the aforesaid Knight. That seemed to be the end of any coherent history on the Blade. Stories were circulated about it being endowed with magic powers, although how this was supposed to have happened is a mystery; people telling this story would silence questions at this point with "some things are not meant to be known," i.e., "I haven't the faintest; why don't you shut up and let me talk or, better yet, show your appreciation and buy me an ale."

According to the legends, the blade was lost for a while ("in the mists of time" usually) then suddenly turned up again to perform miracles in a dozen different places — all at around the same time. The usual scattered bits and pieces of legend-dom.

And I was somehow supposed to find the thing.

After three days of slogging through mud puddles, we came to the village of Morgan's Keep. Someone in our party had heard vague rumours about a miracle that involved the Blade and a goat with a delicate stomach. I didn't try to understand it; I just welcomed the chance to get out of the rain.

The village was a collection of half a dozen crumbling huts, a larger hut with the word "Tavrun" hung over the door on a warped wooden board, a few scrawny goats and scrawnier horses standing dejectedly in the rain, and a dozen or so peasants huddling in their doorways and glaring their welcome at our little entourage. I glanced sidelong at Gilster, wondering if he was going to give them his "Greetings, we come in peace" speech, but he stayed silent. Maybe intelligence lurked behind that shining visor after all.

We dismounted and, walking as best as I could after three days on horseback, headed for the inn. With the possible exception of getting caught climbing the chimney, it was the worst move I ever made.

We had barely sat down and ordered a round of hot cider when a woman joined us. I say "woman," but "hag" would have been more to the point. Hair like dead seaweed soaked in rancid oil streamed out from under a hood that was closest in colour to off-dirt; tiny black eyes, set in a face like partially risen dough, gleamed above the biggest, most deformed nose I had ever seen. The stench rising from this creature would have made a troll pale.

She — it — headed right for me.

She slid onto the bench beside me, which magically emptied to let her sit. I found myself trapped against the wall.

"Is fine young mah-ster, yes?" she drooled. "Gilda see mah-ster come, hear mah-ster knight, search for blade." She tried to look coyly up at me; the effect was not unlike an ogre trying to look intelligent. "Mah-ster want know

where blade? For a pretty?"

I fixed on the word even as I tried to edge around to the window, hoping the garbage pile outside could improve the fragrance. "Blade? You mean the Blade of Orr? You know something about it?" She nodded; that loose flesh bouncing about was an awesome sight.

Gilster leaned towards me. "It would seem, Master Quinn, that this hag knows of our quest." He turned and flashed her his #5 smile — Genteel Knight Dazzles Fair Maiden. She responded by showing the stumps of half a dozen teeth and cackling right in his face. Gilster turned three shades of green before he could get his stomach under control again. "May I suggest," he choked out, "that you find out what she knows."

I nodded. Turning back to her, I spoke as well as I could while holding my breath. "Madam, I am prepared to offer you a generous reward for any information you can offer me and my men." *And an even bigger one if you'll just go away*, I thought.

She grinned and held out her hand. I pushed a few coins towards her and tried not to look nauseated.

"How do you know about us?" I asked.

She grinned again. "Go to Minas. Sell pigs. Minas people talk about mahster, say he look for magic blade. Gilda remember blade, run home."

She thrust out her hand again; I dropped another coin in it, seeing visions of being back in my own bed before nightfall. *Please, gods, don't let this be a dead end*, I prayed.

"And so you have the Broken Blade of Orr?"

"Blade not here. Husband find blade in cave, but gone again." *She has a husband?* "Dragon come and kill husband. Husband fight brave, but dragon big." She paused thoughtfully. "Real big. Gilda all alone now . . ." She trailed off.

I pushed more coins at her. She grinned her appreciation and went on. "Dragon go away, take lots of stuff. Take sword, too. Sword busted, but pretty. Gold barb on sword. Red eyes, blue wings. Pretty." I heard Gilster draw in a sharp breath. He leaned close again, being careful not to breathe.

"I believe this to be a sign from the gods! The crone has described the blade perfectly. And there is only one dragon known in these parts; it will take us less than a week's ride to find the beast. We must set out for the dragon's lair at once!" He drained his mug and rose from the table. The rest of the company did the same, only much more slowly.

I barely had time to reflect that I must be praying to the wrong gods before we were on our way again.

*

It took us another four days of puddle-slogging to get to Mount Death. Mind you, this was only the locals' name for it; on my maps it was aptly labelled Mud Ridge. The entire landscape was a collection of wet earth in various stages of sliminess; it looked like the world's biggest mud pie.

Kelli unpacked his maps of the area. After a moment's study he pointed westward. "Over there. Second hill to the left." I tried to follow his pointing finger and saw nothing but wet dirt; then I noticed the cave.

"Um, say, Gilster. What kind of dragon would need an entrance that big, do you think? I mean, don't they generally like to allow themselves a lot of room, so they can, you know, fly in?"

Gilster shook his head. "Nay, Master Quinn. From what I know of dragonlore, a dragon will not waste his time digging what he does not need. Generally, it will be barely enough to allow him to enter."

Terrific. That cavern must have been thirty feet high.

The company was awaiting my next move. I sighed and picked up my sword. I knew they wouldn't let me rest until I had at least gone into that abyss. I started to trudge towards the cave entrance, trying to figure out how long I could reasonably hide inside before emerging with the news that it seemed deserted folks, time to move on.

I didn't move fast enough to make a clean getaway. Gilster decided to be his tiresome knightly self again.

"Good luck, Master Quinn. May the spirits of your ancestors guide you through this time of dire peril."

I thought about pointing out that my ancestors were probably laughing hysterically at me from safely in the Otherworld, but let it lie. If it had been anyone else, I would have tried to talk them into going into the cave with me . . . better yet, *instead* of me. Unfortunately, Father had probably figured as much too. Ergo, he made sure that Sir Heroism was sent along as the knightly chaperon. Truly, his lack of faith in his eldest son was really starting to get in the way.

There was no way around it. I girded my loins (whatever that means) and headed into the darkness.

"Darkness" was an understatement. I felt nervous about standing still when I couldn't see what could be coming for me. I decided a moving target was harder to hit and started groping along the walls of the cavern. After a few yards it became apparent that I was in a maze painted midnight black. For a while I tried to keep track of where I was heading, then gave up and followed the path at will. What the hell, I figured; it seemed safer than camping at the entrance. Besides, the worst that could happen is I end up outside too quickly and Gilster gets to frown nobly down at me.

Funny, how whenever you figure on the worst that can happen, the *absolute* worst always comes true instead.

I eventually turned a final blind corner and bumped into something. Groping blindly, I ran my hands over what felt like a medium-sized elephant covered in thick brocade. Knowing that this was impossible (elephants are allergic to brocade), I groped on. Something moved beneath my hands, and my fingers rested on dozens of what felt like short daggers pointing at both the ceiling and floor. At about this time a warm breeze blew by my face; the

smell was reminiscent of decomposed fish fertilizer. It was at this point that I placed the obstacle: I had come face-to-snout with a very large and undoubtedly annoyed dragon.

Of course I did what every brave adventurer does in a situation like this: screamed, dropped my sword and promptly started bouncing off the walls. I would have been bouncing still if a pleasant voice hadn't said "Whenever you're through doing that, I'd appreciate an explanation of why you're here. Not often I have such . . . distinguished visitors."

This was just strange enough to shut me up for awhile. I slid down the wall I had been trying to climb and sat in an astonished heap. "Pah - pah - pardon me?"

"I said," came that same pleasant voice, "would you mind terribly explaining just why you're in here?" There was the sound of a great bulk moving across the floor of the cave, a sound of exhaling, and a large oil lamp lit the cavern with a cheery glow. It showed me a thirty-foot tall, slightly potbelly green dragon looking over his spectacles (spectacles?) at me.

Other than the potbelly (and the spectacles, of course), he looked like every dragon in every tapestry I had ever seen. He was covered in scales that varied in colour from an iridescent black to emerald green to a quite attractive turquoise around snout and eyes. The same colourful scales covered the two wings sprouting from his back. His claws were at least a foot long and well manicured; he wore a ruby pinky ring on his left claw. True, it was a rather large stone, but it was unquestionably in good taste. His wings jutted out from a hole cut through a paisley smoking jacket.

He looked quite amused.

I found my voice. "I . . . uh . . . guess I've come to . . . well . . . that is . . . I'm expected to kill you. For the Blade." As soon as the words came out I wished for them back. I've never thought it good policy to threaten dragons.

"Kill me? Oh, you're on one of those quest things, aren't you?" He looked mildly pained. "I had hoped they had done away with those things. Damned annoying, they are."

Over my first fright, I picked myself up and nodded. "Annoying isn't the word. Humiliating is more like it." I started wringing the rain out of my cloak.

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then held out a huge claw. "Where are my manners? Master Tampeous S. Glorfind at your service." He smiled. "Tamp, for short. Pleased to make your acquaintance." I introduced myself, grabbed a talon and shook on it.

When my feet touched the ground again, Tamp turned and motioned for me to follow. "Come, I'd like to hear more. There's tea, if you've a mind." After a week of cold downpours the offer was appealing. *What the hell, I figured, I'll either get a hot drink or be roasted alive. Either way I'll warm up.*

I followed him down a corridor and into a cosy parlour. The room was larger than the main hall at Castle Callis, but somehow it managed not to seem overwhelming; perhaps it had something to do with the tapestries hung

on the walls. Large oil lamps provided light, and an enormous blaze burned splendidly in a stone fireplace large enough to roast an elephant. The fireplace was surrounded by a series of brocaded chairs and couches that ranged wildly in size; some I could sit in with my feet touching the floor, while with others I would need a ladder — or wings. There was an enormous velvet-covered lounge, and set near it a table that rose at least fifteen feet high and held a teapot and a variety of mugs, from dwarf-sized to dragon-sized. As I watched, Tamp settled himself into it.

I climbed into one of the smallest chairs and accepted a cup of tea, politely declining the lumps of sulphur he offered.

Sitting next to a roaring fire with steam rising from my cloak, I found myself pouring out the story of the past week. It was good to have a sympathetic ear for a change. When I finished, Tamp looked more thoughtful than ever.

"And you're saying," he said as he lit an oversized briar pipe, "they expect you to arrive with this bit of metal?" I nodded miserably. "Well, in a way you've accomplished your quest already. The bit of weaponry you're searching for is in the next chamber. You're welcome to it . . . if you still want it."

I started. "So you did get it from the village?"

He blew a smoke ring — and not with the pipe. "Not quite the way the wife tells it. I traded a bottle of rather cheap wine for it. I hear the man staggered into a well the next day and broke his neck. Or perhaps," he gave a wry smile, "he got downwind of his wife."

There was one thing still bothering me. "Say, why would you want a cracked blade, anyhow? It isn't . . ."

"Magic? Hardly." He snorted an exclamation point. "No, I use bits of broken armour and weapons in my hobby. I find it's a good pastime for someone of my . . . talents." He smiled, showing lots of teeth. "Actually the perfect hobby for one with a furnace in his midriff."

"Pardon me, but what exactly is this hobby? And why wouldn't I want the Blade?"

He leaned down, looming over me. I craned my neck backwards to look him in the snout.

"Well, it's this way . . ."

*

So here I am, heading for home again. Gilster isn't talking to me. Frankly, it's a relief.

You see, he's a tad miffed that his Great Quest didn't end quite exactly the way he planned. Sure, we're heading home with the Broken Blade of Orr . . . or rather, what used to be the Broken Blade of Orr.

It seems that Tamp's hobby was metalworking. He really was a decent sort, made no fuss at all about my taking his latest project. So here I am heading home . . .

With the Unbroken Ashtray of Orr. ❖

Handicapped Help

by Jena Snyder

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Claudia nervously lit another cigarillo, her third of the day, as she waited for her new temporary Help to arrive. Once again she glanced at the ad she'd copied out of the Baton Rouge Yellow Pages: "Saturday's Servants," it read, "the answer to your housekeeping prayers. Clean, quiet, obedient Help for an excellently low one-time fee."

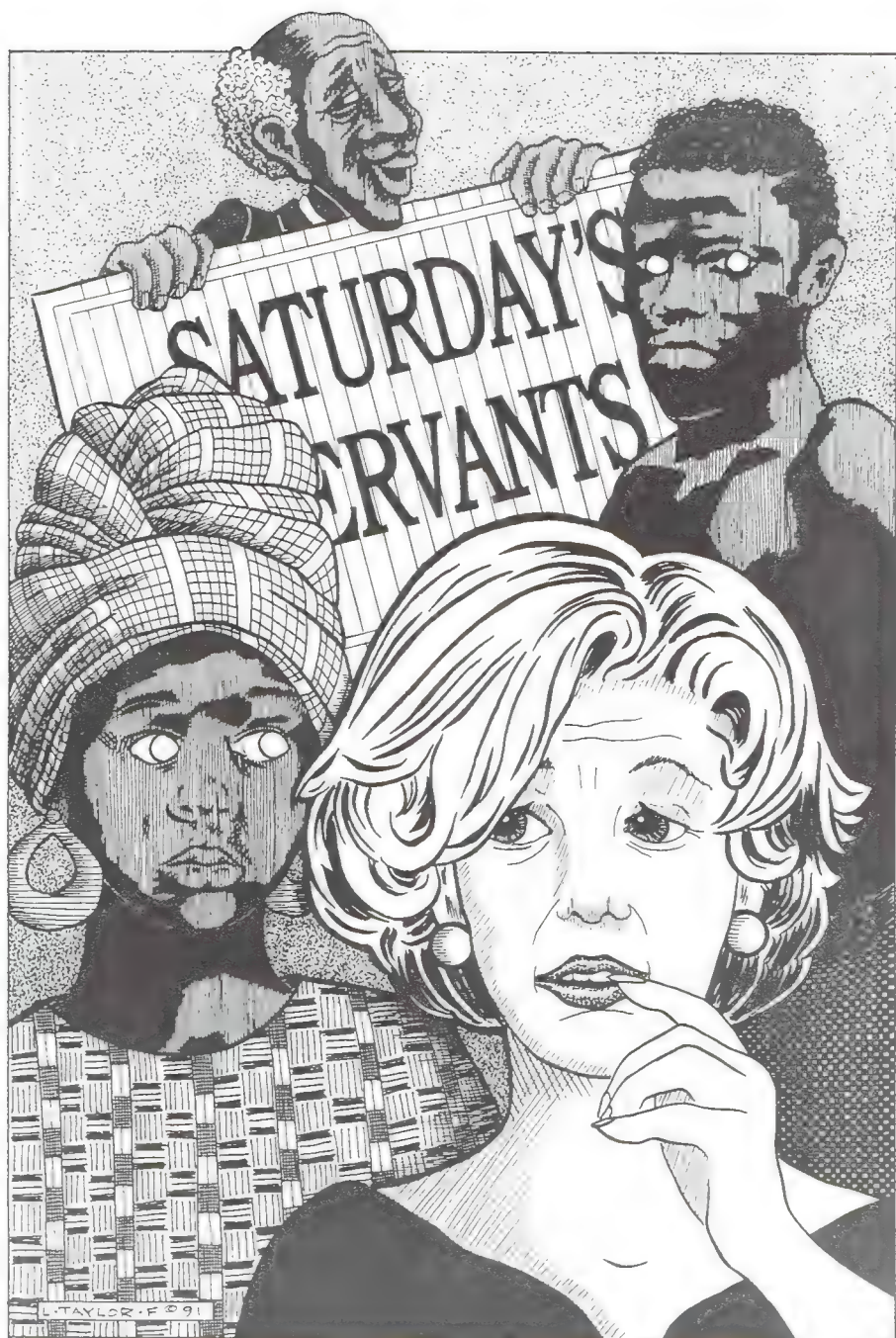
Now that it was Monday morning, however, she was having grave second thoughts. The money she'd borrowed from her friend Lucinda was supposed to have been paid back last month, but had gone against the mortgage instead. . .

Claudia took a long, shuddering drag off her cigarillo. *You really don't have any choice in the matter, old girl*, she reminded herself grimly. *After all, it is the Laceys coming to visit.* Anita Benbow-Kitts Lacey, queen of the lift-and-tucks, and her banker husband Edward Moorhouse Lacey, who'd dropped a sly, arch-browed hint that he might be persuaded to extend Claudia's already dangerously over-extended mortgage . . . if she could come up with the right "collateral."

Claudia dragged hard on the cigarillo again. *I know what kind of collateral you mean, you turkey-necked, blackmailing bastard*, she thought in a hot burst of anger. *38-double-D collateral. The only asset I've got left.* Time was, years ago, just a flash of those perfect 38's would have been enough to finance a measly hundred thousand dollar loan, but now. . .

Damn Charlie for wrapping the Jag around a tree! she thought savagely. *Double damn him for cutting the insurance to the bone first, so he could buy his little tart a sable! Triple damn him for leaving me so broke I have to resort to hiring Help out of the Yellow Pages, just so I can impress Anita Lacey!*

A travelling mound of dust was coming up the drive. Claudia stubbed out her cigarillo in a nearby potted azalea and smoothed her skirt with suddenly damp palms. If this didn't work out, she knew, she'd lose the house.



"Here we go," Claudia muttered as the ball of dust became a faded yellow station wagon slowing as it neared the house. She fixed her smile on her face and started down the steps.

A skeletally-thin black man angled out of the driver's seat, beaming at Claudia as if she were a freshly-split catfish on ice. "Miz Douglas!" he cried, grasping her hand in his bony fingers and pumping it up and down with vigour.

"It's Peabody-Douglas, ectually," Claudia corrected him, but he was too busy herding his charges out of the still-coughing car. "Mr. Labelle, I'm not sure that—"

Hands on hips, he was examining the sadly neglected mansion with a practised eye. "Miz Douglas, you called the right man! Ti-Jean Labelle's people get everything ship-shape in— HEY!"

Claudia started back with a half-voiced shriek. "What? What?"

"LOUANNE, YOU STOP THAT RIGHT NOW!" the man bellowed in outrage. Moments later he was grinning obsequiously at Claudia, the offending Louanne forgiven or forgotten. "Here we are — my handpicked best, Miz Douglas: Henri, your new gardener; Cilla, the best cook in all Louisiana state; your houseboy, Alphonse — guess you can't see him back there, unloadin' the bags — and this be Alphonse' wife Louanne, your new maid."

Claudia's jaw dropped. The three faces before her were absolutely, utterly devoid of any intelligence, any expression, any . . . *anything*. If these were the best domestic staff Saturday's Servants had to offer, she shuddered to imagine what second best might be, let alone the "economy" people he had mentioned. The gardener looked to be a hundred years old, a wizened brown gnome with no teeth in his slack, open mouth; the cook, maybe five years his junior, was a sagging, sad, bag of flesh who looked as if her primary goal in life was to sit down. At least the maid was young, Claudia told herself. She forced herself to smile graciously as she extended her hand to the girl. "So pleased to—"

Ti-Jean Labelle slapped her hand down with a violent curse. "NO, NO, NO!" he admonished, shaking his finger in Claudia's astonished face. "Miz Douglas, this is never goin' work out if you can't remember the rules! Now, I told you over the phone, they's rules you got to follow. First and foremost is no bein' nice! The Help never do no work if you be *nice* to 'em!

"You better go over the rules while I'm here," he worried, "just so's you get 'em right. Number One . . ."

"Treat the Help firmly," Claudia repeated through clenched teeth.

Ti-Jean Labelle clapped his hands together as if she'd recited the Constitution while dancing on the head of a pin. "Yes!" he cried. "Yes, indeed! Number Two . . . ?"

"Don't let the Help wander. I was wondering—" Claudia meant to ask him to explain that one a little more, but he cut her off.

"Lock 'em up at night; you got it. Number Three?"

"Three. . ." Claudia said slowly, checking her manicure. *Shit!* she thought

desperately. *What was Three? Something about eating . . .* "Um. Don't let them eat . . ."

Ti-Jean Labelle was waiting eagerly, but something caught his eye before Claudia got halfway through. "LOUANNE!" he bawled. "YOU CUT THAT OUT, OR I'M GONNA WHOMP YOU GOOD! —Sorry, Miz Douglas. Like I say, you always got to be on your guard. Once they get it in they heads to wander, they jus' goes for miles! No salt. That's Number Three. Number Four?"

Salt! Claudia thought in exasperation. *What are they on, some kind of high blood-pressure diet?* But she knew the next rule. "Four: cash only." That one was easy, thanks to Charlie and his running battle with the IRS. Claudia felt the pressure in her chest ease a little. It just might work out, after all.

"An' the last one?"

Claudia wasn't listening. She was too busy staring in awe at the houseboy, Alphonse, who had finally managed, in ten minutes, to unload two suitcases and a small box of round, earthen pots from the car. *Oh God*, she thought, *this is perfect! Perfect!* One look at him, and Anita Lacey would forget all about keeping her eagle eyes on her husband! *Yes! Yes!* Claudia wanted to shout in glee. She'd have all the time in the world with old Turkey-neck! Time enough to get him to extend the loan into the next century!

"LOUANNE!" The bellow brought Claudia back to earth with a jerk.

Claudia goggled, aghast, as Labelle began whacking the maid with a large stick. "HOW MANY TIMES I TOLE YOU? LEAVE ALPHONSE BE! AND THEM POTS! —Miz Douglas?" he smiled sweetly.

Claudia was too stunned to answer. Labelle had told her on the phone the Help frequently had to be beaten — "jus' to get their attention" — but she hadn't believed him. "The pots—" she said breathlessly as Alphonse handed the box to the cook. "Don't open the pots."

"That's right, Miz Douglas," Ti-Jean Labelle displayed a dazzling array of square, white teeth, like a perfect row of white marble tombstones in a mid-night-black graveyard.

"If it's going to be a problem," Claudia said pensively, "why leave the pots here at all? Why don't you keep them?"

"Oh, couldn't do that! No sirree!" He sidled closer, white toothbrush eyebrows twitching. "It's got t'do with their religion," he explained in an embarrassed mutter. "Y'see, these folks is from Haiti, and those pots . . . well, let's jus' say they believes their souls are sealed up in them pots, to keep 'em safe!" He chuckled merrily, twirling his finger by his temple. "Ain't that the biggest bunch of mumbo-jumbo you ever heard?"

Claudia made a *moué* of distress. "But—"

"Now, don't you worry none about them cuttin' up chickens, or stickin' pins in dolls," Labelle hastened to add. "They just got some crazy ideas. Don't you worry your pretty lil' head about it, Miz Douglas. They be the best Help you ever had!"

Claudia had the sudden, disconcerting revelation that his *Amos n' Andy*

routine was as false as that smile. "Don't you forget, now," he went on smoothly. "The Help only be as good as the master — or mistress." He chuckled at his little joke, and Claudia forced a smile in return.

"You sure you don't want 'em longer? Another thousand, an' you can keep 'em till they turn into dust . . . No? You sure?"

"I'm sure," Claudia smiled, thinking, *One week is all it will take. Six days to clean the place to Anita's standards, one evening to dangle the bait in front of Edward's nose, and I'm set.*

A few minutes later, and a thousand dollars poorer, Claudia watched the yellow station wagon disappear down the drive. The Help stood aimlessly at her side: the cow-faced housemaid, Louanne, with her blank, hazel eyes; the deflating *soufflé* of a cook, Cilla; Alphonse, the godlike, teenaged houseboy; and Henri, the ancient garden gnome. All Negro, they varied in shades from Cilla's piano-key black to Alphonse's delicate *café au lait*. Claudia couldn't resist reaching out to touch the boy's smooth, brown arm. But as her fingers skimmed his wrist, Louanne pushed past her, effectively bumping Alphonse out of the way.

There was no sign of jealousy — or, for that matter, any expression at all in Louanne's pale eyes — but Claudia instantly recognized the maid's abrupt movement for what it was. She was jealous.

So what? she asked herself. *As gorgeous as he is, Claudia, you're not going to pull an Anita Lacey and try to get that sweet young thing into your bed. You know damn well since Charlie cremated himself in the Jag, you haven't missed him — any part of him — one little bit.*

A moment later, she was jarred out of her reverie. Louanne was endeavouring to wrest the box of snugly-sealed pots from Cilla, who was protesting in a feeble, anxious whine. "I'll take those," Claudia said firmly, ending the matter. "There's work to be done."

Work? Claudia gave her once-glorious foyer a sad glance. The perfect wallpaper she'd searched so long to find was now peeling in a few spots; the marble floor had been scratched when some of the furniture had been repossessed; the vases that once held fresh roses every morning were now graced with dusty silk lilies. The place looked more like a funeral parlour than a country estate.

"All right!" Claudia barked. "We've got six days to—"

She caught a movement out of the corner of her eye: Cilla, already half-way down the drive, shuffling along as if she really had a destination in mind.

"Louanne, go get her," Claudia sighed. *I just have to make it through one night with the Laceys, she thought. Then I can call Monsieur Ti-Jean Labelle and tell him to pick up his damn morons!*

*

Henri was the hardest one to control, Claudia found, since he was always outside and out of sight. She finally had to resort to tying a long cord round his ankle, confining him to a 100-yard radius at a time. Claudia's mama had

clipped her to the clothesline to keep her in the yard when she was a little girl; it ought to work for the damn gardener!

It amazed her the way they'd take it into their empty heads to just up and go. One minute Cilla would be in the kitchen, absorbed in the challenging task of stirring the Bouillabaisse and the next, she'd be shuffling across the lawn on a beeline for the fishpond.

Jesus, but they're dim! Claudia thought with a sigh. But at that moment, Alphonse brought her a Margarita, and he was so heart-stoppingly gorgeous she couldn't stay irritated. "Thank you, Alphonse," she said, and he replied with a sweet, vacant smile that made her warm all over. *Dim*, she thought, *but adorable*.

And unbelievably cheap to keep. Claudia was convinced Cilla must be putting some kind of drug in their breakfast — *saltless porridge*, she thought with a shudder. Because besides not stopping for breakfast, lunch, or dinner, none of them took any breaks. Not one. They worked steadily — very slowly, but steadily — until assigned to another task, or banished to their rooms for the night.

By Thursday afternoon, Claudia was seriously considering Ti-Jean Labelle's offer to keep them on permanently. A quick calculation told her that by Christmas, she'd save a thousand dollars in groceries alone. Friday, she beetled off to Baton Rouge to give Labelle his money: dim or not, the Help were staying with Claudia for good.

*

When the Laceys finally arrived late Saturday, Claudia was finally able to relax and enjoy playing Mistress of the House, never once getting as much as a snotty look in return from the Help. Other than Louanne — always a bit of a renegade — Cilla and Henri and beautiful Alphonse were as docile as cows.

Now Louanne . . . Claudia blew a nice, fat smoke ring as Anita Lacey caught her first glimpse of Alphonse, goggling openly. Well, Louanne was very young, and a little high-strung. *Too much salt, maybe*, Claudia thought with a giggle, and called for another Margarita.

"Wherever did you find them, Claudia darling?" Anita Lacey purred, devouring Alphonse with her vulture-sharp eyes. "Look at that ass!" Her hand reached out to idly pat the boy, but Louanne thrust the tray of Margaritas between them, cutting her off rather neatly. Claudia pretended not to notice, but was inwardly cheering, *One for Louanne*.

"They're so quiet, so, so . . ." Anita was murmuring hungrily.

"Perfect? Aren't they, though?" Claudia nodded.

"Perfect." Edward Lacey was admiring the vast expanse of creamy white flesh displayed by Claudia's deep-cut blouse, but Anita, still transfixed by Alphonse, hadn't noticed. Claudia grinned, bending over a little to offer Edward a better view of her amazing cleavage. It was going to work. It was really going to work.

*

Old as he was, Edward did have some spark left: every time Anita's eyes glazed, fixating on Alphonse as he wandered by with the *hors d'oeuvres* tray, Edward would casually lean over and attempt to slip his hand up Claudia's skirt. Just as casually, she'd counter by lunging for a *canapé* or, if he managed to close his hand round her knee, she'd spring lightly from her lawn chair to "check on dinner." She could stomach the role of *hors d'oeuvres*, but had no intention of becoming his main course. No matter how many times she'd been the full-meal deal in the past, she just couldn't face it now.

Between the Cajun jumbo shrimp and the blackened snapper, when Claudia was forced to stab Edward's hand under the table with her fish fork, the banker finally realized he wasn't getting any early pay-out. Louanne was dispatched to fetch his briefcase.

Thinking she was home free, Claudia signalled grandly for Cilla to bring in the dessert tray, and allowed herself the luxury of a two thousand calorie chocolate *éclair*.

But as Louanne shuffled in with the banker's case, Anita made a pouty face, pursing her Perfect Pink lips, and announced, "No business yet! Darling, you haven't shown us the grounds, or the pool—" Her eyebrows rose as an idea suddenly struck. "The pool! Oh, let's all go for a little dip! It's been so hot and muggy today, I could just die for a swim!"

"But . . ." Claudia scrambled desperately to come up with a good reason why they couldn't go for a "little dip." "Bathing suits," she tried. "Surely you didn't bring a suit, Anita?"

"Oh, we always do!" Anita purred, her eyes on Alphonse. "We won't even look at a hotel that doesn't have a pool and a hot tub."

Edward patted his briefcase. "We can take this out on the lawn, Claudia, and do our business there. While Anita's doing her laps."

"Marvellous," Claudia said weakly. "I'll tell Henri to take the cover off the pool."

*

At ten o'clock, the Laceys were still parked on Claudia's lawn, sucking down Margaritas like there was no tomorrow. Anita had paddled languidly across the pool a few times — more, Claudia suspected, to show off her newly renovated *derrière* than anything else. Alphonse, standing at poolside with a towel, took about as much notice as a lawnchair would.

Claudia was vaguely aware of Edward's fingers creeping up her thigh like a lecherous spider, but the Margaritas had dulled her; she wearily brushed the hand away instead of giving it a good whack. One more drink, and she'd just give up and let Edward do whatever he wanted, just to get it over with and get them the hell out. As if reading her mind, Edward leered at her gold *lamé* bosom. "How 'bout just one more drinkie before we sign those papers?"

"Not for me." Anita languidly sipped at her still-full glass. It was obvious she didn't want to miss anything by being too tipsy.

Thank God I locked up Henri and Cilla right after dinner! Claudia thought

woozily as she waved for Louanne. The way she'd been knocking back the tequila, they could have been halfway to New Orleans before she'd noticed.

Louanne came shuffling toward them — *Christ*, Claudia thought, at the end of her patience, *can't any of them walk like normal people?* — and stood, cowl-like, waiting for an order.

"More drinks, Louanne."

"Ooh, I'm afraid it's potty-time!" Anita said coyly. "I'm dying to get out of this suit." She batted her false lashes at the houseboy as she ran a Perfect Pink nail round her *décolletage*. "Alphonse, can you show me where the bathroom is?"

The boy blinked, obviously not comprehending, and Claudia quickly improvised, "*Le salle de bain*, Alphonse: bathroom, remember? — I'm afraid his English isn't quite that good, Anita."

"As long as his French is," the woman said with a predatory smirk, then lowered her voice to a whisper. "It's his staying capacity, not his brain capacity, I'm interested in. With an ass like that, darling, who needs intelligence? Edward, you two can keep yourselves occupied for about half an hour, can't you? — Wait for me, Alphonse!"

Claudia's heart sank as Anita loped after the boy, drink in hand. Edward, leering, reached over and placed his hand on Claudia's knee again. "Now, my dear," he smiled, "let's get down to business, shall we?"

No one took any notice of Louanne, halfway to the house, empty tray in hand. As Anita slipped her arm round Alphonse's narrow waist, the maid's face twisted into a soundless howl.

In the end, there was no getting round it: Claudia was forced to bite the bullet. Fifteen minutes had dragged by since Anita disappeared with the houseboy, but the old coot was still only at the squeaking stage, bleating at ten-second intervals as he stared off into space.

Come on, come on! Claudia thought wearily. *Your damn wife could be back any minute!* She massaged her breasts hopefully against his bony knees, and was finally rewarded for her efforts.

"AAAHHH!" the banker moaned, clinging to her ears as his scrawny body went into overdrive. "AAGH! EEK! UUNGH!"

He suddenly launched himself half out of the chair, nearly choking Claudia, and screeched like a stuck pig. One of his knees rammed her in the chest, knocking her on her rump, and she let out a most unladylike curse as she sprawled on the wet astroturf, breasts spilling out of her gold *lamé* bathing suit.

She recovered quickly, replacing her smile as she tucked her bosoms back in place. "Oh, darling," she said with a catch of admiration in her breath, "you're such a stallion!"

As far as Claudia was concerned, the white-haired banker resembled more of a hairless baboon than a stallion. A baboon having a coronary. Edward, still

wheezing and twitching, had collapsed in the lawn chair and was staring glassily into space. "—drink—!" he gasped, tongue clacking against his dentures. "—so dry—!"

Louanne came shuffling slowly out of the house with a tray of fresh drinks, moving at the speed of a snail in no hurry. Claudia intercepted her halfway, snatching a Margarita off the tray to wave it under Edward's nose. The banker rolled his eyes, uttering a pathetic groan as he grabbed for it. "Not so fast," Claudia growled, yanking it out of reach. She thrust the waiting loan and pen into Edward's twitching hands. "You can have your little drinkie — *after* you sign."

Edward's fingers closed spasmodically round the pen. Claudia held her breath, waiting. *Come on, come on!* she silently urged. Seconds ticked by, and then, finally, he signed.

Claudia felt the fist round her heart abruptly let go. Her scowl became a glowing smile, and she handed Edward his reward. "You don't know how much I— Edward?"

Before he even managed to taste the Margarita, the banker gave a hiccup of surprise. With a puzzled, "Ungh?" he clutched spasmodically at his chest, pitched forward onto the lawn, twitched twice, and was utterly still.

"Louanne, go call 911!" Claudia cried, but at the same moment, there was a shriek from the house so loud and piercing it made all the fine hairs on the back of her neck jolt in response. She gaped at the dead banker, glanced toward the house, down at the banker again — and decided Edward didn't need her. Sprinting for the house, she prayed the expired banker's damned wife hadn't just been screwed to death, too. Louanne followed at a passably-brisk shuffle, still carrying the tray with the remaining Margarita.

Before she could reach the house, Claudia saw she'd been wrong about the shriek: it hadn't been Anita who'd screamed, but Alphonse. She could tell, because he was still screaming, one long, rippling, jumble of words that rose to a howl at the end: "DEAD I'M DEAD DEAD OH JESUS JESUS DEAD I SHOULD BE BURIED DEAD OH CHRIST WHAT HAPPENED TO MEEEEEE???"

"Alphonse!" Anita was crying, clinging to the boy's arm as he towed her forward, moving at a steady, lumbering shamble. "Alphonse, stop for a minute! Let's talk about it! Tell me what's wrong!"

It was obvious the seduction had been progressing at a good clip before something had gone hideously wrong: Anita's suit was at her waist, her gravity-defying tits bare, and Alphonse's clothes were in similar disarray, his shirttails flapping in the breeze, his fly down. Salt from Anita's drink clung like little jewels all round the howling "O" of his mouth, and there were streaks of Margarita on his shirt.

They were nearly at the freshly-rototilled garden before Claudia caught up to them. But before she could intervene, a brown hand snaked out and closed round her wrist, the fingernails biting into her skin. Louanne's pale,

unwavering gaze froze Claudia where she stood. Though she didn't say a word, Claudia understood there was absolutely nothing she could do: whatever was happening with Alphonse, the terrible, flat resignation in her maid's twisted face said, no one could do anything that would help. In a helpless panic, Claudia could only stand and watch.

Anita had managed to get in front of Alphonse, hoping to bar his forward progress. "Wait, darling! Wait!" Hands planted flat against his chest, she was churning up clods of moist, black dirt from the garden as she tried to brace herself. "Alphonse—" she panted. "Give me another chance—"

As the boy's bare feet hit the soft dirt of the garden, he shuddered from head to toe. "Ground . . ." he moaned piteously. "In the ground. Must be. Buried. Buried. Must be—"

His forward lunge knocked Anita off balance, and with a *woof!* of surprise, she landed on her rear. Oblivious, Alphonse flung himself down and began to scoop out huge clumps of dirt, flinging them behind him as he dug himself into the garden like a giant, burrowing turtle. Anita, pinned beneath him, disappeared in seconds, her own shrieks muffled and clogged with dirt. "Alphonse! Let me *ukgh—!* Stop! *Kkgh! Pth!* I can't—"

"Oh my God . . . !" Claudia gasped, straining to wrest herself out of Louanne's grasp. "Let me go! Anita! Oh Christ, *Anita!*"

Trapped beneath the slowly-descending houseboy, Anita had completely vanished. All that could be seen of Alphonse was his beautiful ass, but before Claudia could cry out one last time, even that was gone. For a few moments, the dirt churned and boiled as Alphonse continued to dig, but then it stopped, presumably when he hit the six-foot depth he sought.

When the garden was still once more, Louanne finally released Claudia's wrist and let out a long, sorrowful moan, her hand falling to her side. The Margarita shivered on the tray in her other hand, but not a drop went over the salt-rimed edge.

"What happened?" Claudia whispered to her maid. "Louanne? Do you know?"

With another moan, the girl nodded. "*Mort,*" she said simply, the single word scraped from her throat.

"Dead! Yes, I know that!" Claudia said impatiently. "They're both dead — and Edward, too! But why? Why did he do that — dig himself into the ground, burying them both alive?"

"*Non,*" the girl sighed. "*Bury mort. Alphonse . . . mort.*"

"Alphonse was no more dead than you or—" Claudia stopped short with a jerk, a horrible, horrible thought popping into her head. She stared open-mouthed at her maid, choking on the words. "You mean — you and — all of you, Cilla, Henri, you — *Dead?* — You're all *dead?*"

The maid nodded again, bleakly, at the sweating Margarita on her tray. It wasn't until then that Claudia's brain registered: *salt.*

Louanne nodded. Running a finger over the salt, she stared at the little

crystals. "Like blood, the salt . . . like life blood. . . it breaks the spell. He wakes, remembers he is dead . . ." Her face suddenly twisted, a mask of pain. "Ah, Alphonse . . . !"

Claudia closed her fingers round Louanne's cool wrist, needing the physical evidence of no pulse to convince her. A moment later, finding nothing, she let the girl's hand drop. She was suddenly very tired. "There's nothing we can do now, Louanne. Come back to the house. We'll have to phone the police, get them out here to—"

The enormity of what had happened hit her then. Both her guests were dead, one murdered, and one of her staff — also dead — had killed her. And though she'd had nothing to do with any of it — aside from causing Edward Lacey's heart attack — she'd somehow get blamed, maybe even go to jail. Lose the house.

The damned house. If it hadn't been for that, Claudia thought grimly, none of this would have happened in the first place. If I'd just let it go— She realized Louanne was prodding her, trying to get her attention.

"Pots," the maid said, as if that explained it all. Still carrying the Margarita on the tray, she clamped her hand round her mistress' wrist again and towed her to the house, to the high shelf of the kitchen pantry where Claudia had put the four round, sealed pots for safe-keeping. Louanne lifted one down and, turning it in her hands with great reverence, kissed it before handing it to Claudia. "Open," she instructed, tears in her eyes.

"And break another one of those damned rules?" Claudia snorted. "Not a chance!"

"Must," Louanne said simply, tapping the top of the pot. "Alphonse . . . here. Please. Make him free?"

Claudia had no idea what Louanne was trying to tell her. Was "here" supposed to mean "in the pot"? That didn't make sense. Alphonse was six feet under in the garden, quiet as a gladiola bulb, but a lot less likely to poke his head back up through the dirt next spring.

"Please," Louanne said again. Her hand brushed the round, rough side of the pot in a caress. "His *esprit* is here, trapped. Please."

"His—?" *Oh, Lord,* Claudia thought, remembering. *His soul. His soul is locked up inside the pot!*

Her heart went out to the girl. As little intelligence and humanity was left inside her, Louanne loved Alphonse, loved him enough that the memory was probably the only thing left still rattling around in her poor empty head.

"All right," Claudia said gently. Taking the pot, she rapped it smartly against the kitchen counter like an egg, and the lid popped off. As it did, a tiny puff of dust rose and spiralled upward, thinner and thinner until it dissipated against the ceiling. When it was gone, Louanne let out a soft "Ah!"

Taking another pot down from the shelf, she handed it hopefully to her mistress. "Now Louanne?"

"Just a minute—" Claudia held up her hand, thinking rapidly. She'd had

an idea. Henri was supposed to put the bedding plants in tomorrow morning, but if she untied him . . . And then had Louanne help him drag the old goat off the lawn and up into one of the bedrooms . . .

If she could make it look like something other than the truth had happened, maybe . . .

A smile began to lighten Claudia's face. "It's a deal," she nodded, clasping Louanne's cold hands. "If you can do just one more thing for me, I'll set you all free."

*

"Big Easy" Banker Dead in Sex Scandal!

Baton-Rouge (AP) — In the early hours of May fifth, Baton-Rouge police received a hysterical call from Mrs. Claudia (Peabody) Douglas of Magnolia Road. According to Mrs. Douglas, both her maid, 18-year-old Louanne Desjarlais, and one of her weekend guests, Bank of New Orleans C.E.O. Edward Moorhouse Lacey, 76, were dead. To add to the shock, Mrs. Douglas was told by her cook that the banker's wife, Mrs. Anita Benbow-Kitts Lacey, 57, had run off with the 16-year-old houseboy, Alphonse St. Paradis.

Mrs. Douglas told this reporter that the evening had begun quietly enough with a dip in the pool, but that too many Margaritas must have loosened her houseguests' inhibitions. It was approximately midnight when Mrs. Douglas (Miss Louisiana 1962 and still in beauty-contest form), came back to the pool after changing to find both the Laceys and two of her servants missing. When she questioned her remaining staff, the cook, Miss Cilla Pettibone, age 62, claimed Mrs. Lacey told her she was "running away to some little island love nest" with the houseboy.

A search of the twelve-bedroom mansion resulted in a grisly discovery: the dead bodies of Edward Lacey, acquitted two years ago of misappropriation of bank funds, and the Douglas maid, Louanne Desjarlais.

According to paramedics at the scene, Edward Lacey likely expired of a massive heart attack brought on by sexual excitation and an over-consumption of Tequila. The banker was found on the bed clad in scanty underthings including a pink lace garter belt and matching Merry Widow. It appears Miss Desjarlais, found fully-clothed in the doorway of the bedroom, died of shock.

When Mrs. Douglas was asked how she would cope with this new scandal — her playboy husband, Charles Wentworth Douglas, was killed in a spectacular fiery car crash at his front gates — the beleaguered socialite gave this reporter a brave smile, and nodded down at her prize-winning flower garden. "My Help and I spent the past week putting in all these annuals," she said with a catch in her voice. "When the flowers come up, I'll just imagine Louanne and Alphonse are right here with me."

(Photos by Archie "Digger" VanDroll, *Baton-Rouge Muckraker* staff photographer: taken from a trellis outside the Douglas mansion death-bedroom using 1000 ASA film and a 400 mm. telephoto lens.) ♀

Puce fairy book

by Alice Major

you wanted Rapunzel waiting in a tower
braids of hair like ropes
stairs that only you could climb

my hair would never grow long enough.

you wanted a lady sleeping in a garden
no rings on her fingers
never been kissed

other princes had made it through my forest.

so you tried revisionist tale-telling
and turned them into dwarves—
you wanted happy ever after

I forgot to water the roses round the door.

I piled up mattresses to cushion you
but you tossed and turned
bruised by that one small nub—

that part of me that is no fairy tale.

you brought me a crystal slipper
on a heart-shaped pillow
pretty but slightly passé.

my foot was too big to fit into it.

you might have been the one true prince
but on mature consideration
I declined the honour

of cutting off my toe. ♪



Astronomical Odds

by Donna Farley

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Gnorf Kliggertrumpf, garden gnome first class, cowered on the floor of Her Ladyship's judgment hall. At the feet of Her Terrestrial Magnificence stood the gaggle of snowflake fairies who had snitched on him. Now one of them stepped forward with the formal accusation.

"Please, Greatest Lady, we saw him feeding a carrot to one of — of that bearded fellow's reindeer!"

There was a sudden silence amongst the assembled Hierarchs, sprites, elves and assorted lesser members of the Ecopantheon. Her Ladyship's countenance changed colour, first to rose, then fuchsia, and finally to a full-fledged beet red.

Gnorf fell on his knees, and turned desperate eyes to the Lady Fauna, the Hierarch in charge of animal life. "Oh, please, Hierarch, ask Her Ladyship to spare me! I did it out of kindness to one of your deer!"

"My deer indeed," sniffed Fauna. "They deserted me for that, that— Outsider!"

"Gnorf Kliggertrumpf, you are judged guilty of treason against the Ecopantheon," intoned the exalted Mother, "by consorting with and granting aid to an Outsider. Take him away for a millennium on the tooth fairy detail."

"No! Not that, please!" cried Gnorf, his eyes round and horrified. Tooth fairy! The job had practically been invented by mortals; the collection of teeth, being of no significance whatever to the Ecopantheonology, was nothing but a make-work project designed specifically to occupy troublesome elements. Troublesome elements! Why, Gnorf had never in all the aeons of his life so much as trod on the toes of a fellow Ecopantheonite!

A crowd of snickering imps bore him gleefully away from the judgment hall. They confiscated his beloved red cap and well-worn green garden togs,

shaved his white beard and hair, sharpened his ears and implanted a pair of gossamer wings. Then to add insult to injury they dressed him in a tooth fairy's puff-sleeved jerkin and matching hose. After a brief harangue from the head tooth fairy, which served for orientation, the Wind whisked Gnorf off to his first assignment, depositing him on a suburban back yard fence.

As he blew off, the Wind gave the new tooth fairy a final contemptuous shove. Trying to steady himself, Gnorf somehow got one of his turned-up shoes caught in a crack in the fence.

"Go blow yourself inside out," he muttered after the Wind. Both hands on his leg, he tugged the foot out, only to slip on an icy patch and topple off backward. Forgetting to use his brand-new gossamer wings, he landed flat on his back in the snow.

"Damn that Nicholas," he muttered, but only half-heartedly, because Nicholas wasn't ever going to be damned, no matter who cursed him.

Her Ladyship's usual way of dealing with Nicholas and the other Outsiders was to pretend they didn't exist. The current Spirit of the Age, who directed mortal opinion, favored this attitude, with the result that few mortals even thought about the Outsiders these days. This in turn weakened the Outsiders' influence; but Nicholas was a notable exception, receiving a good deal of fervent if sometimes misguided attention, every December.

Gnorf sighed. If only he hadn't listened to the frost-sprites and their tales of the peculiar Outsider who wore a red cap and beard like a gnome! But a real garden gnome had no business even being awake on Christmas Eve, let alone feeding the Outsider's reindeer a carrot. Some frost sprite or snowflake fairy had seen Gnorf and reported his "treasonous act" to the Wind, and now here he was, his serene and useful life as a garden gnome on hold for a thousand years while he slaved at this humiliating tooth fairy business.

Still lying on his back in the snow, Gnorf gazed morosely up at the sky, where he caught sight of the first star of the evening.

"Star light, star bright," he recited, though without any real intent, "First star I see tonight. Wish I may, wish I might—"

"Sorry, too late," said the star.

A stray snowflake tickled Gnorf's nose. He sneezed and sat up, frowning. He had never given wishing stars a moment's thought in his life. Wishing stars were Celestial powers, who went about their own sky-high business while the earthbound fays went about theirs.

"I wish I'd never seen that white-bearded old man and his mangy deer," Gnorf grumbled.

"I said you can't have it," said the star. "Somebody beat you to it."

Gnorf picked himself up and blew away the powdery snow on his face. "I heard you. It was a rhetorical wish."

He cocked one eye at the twinkling star. "Besides, that wish stuff is only for mortals anyway, isn't it?"

The star winked at him. "Nothing in the rules about it. We just don't get

many requests from immortals."

Gnorf's eyes bulged. "Hold on here. You mean, if I'd been quicker, I could've had my wish?"

"Well," said the star, "Theoretically, yes. First of all, only one wish a night gets granted at any given location— you realize of course that I appear at different times at different longitudes and latitudes as dusk falls, and of course in some locations and times there's a different wishing star on duty, since I'm not always the first to appear—"

"I know the earth is round, okay? But can I make a wish and have a chance of getting it granted, same as a mortal?"

"Well, you have to be first. And furthermore, if there are numerous simultaneous wishes— and there always are— I have to grant the smallest one, the one that will upset the Ecobalance the least. Have to be careful of too much supernatural intervention, you know. And, of course, only one wish in a lifetime to a customer."

Gnorf was ready to tear his hair, but he of course had none left. "Look, I want to know about me. Me, Gnorf Kliggertrumpf. Could I wish myself promoted back up to garden gnome from tooth fairy?"

"Yes, you could. But—"

"All right, all right. So what are the odds?"

The star hesitated. "Astronomical," it said at last, and ducked behind a cloud.

Gnorf grimaced after it, then straightened his white cap and tested his wings. He made a somewhat wobbly flight over to the house where his first assignment was waiting.

He sneaked into the kid's room by using his wand, which of course was not magical, to pry open the bedroom window. He waited on the windowsill for a while to be sure six-year-old Jason Finlayson was really asleep, because it was a sad truth that very young children were capable of seeing immortals by starlight. If they did spot you, you were compelled to do their bidding. Gnorf's wings trembled involuntarily.

Reassured by the wheezy breathing, he slipped under the pillow, rummaging about till he nearly suffocated before finding the tooth. Secreting it in the pouch he wore at his waist, he crawled out from under the mountainous pillow again, only to be confronted by Jason's saucer-shaped eyes.

"Wow!" said the boy. "It's really true! When you wish on a star, it comes true!"

Gnorf groaned. "Holy Saint Nicholas!" Then he clapped a hand over his mouth, hoping no-one had heard him swear by an Outsider power.

Jason was feeling about under his pillow, without taking his eyes off Gnorf. "You got the tooth already?"

Gnorf nodded mutely.

"Where's my money?"

Gnorf ground his teeth. "Look, kid, contrary to popular opinion, that isn't

my responsibility. I just take the tooth, and I only do that 'cause they invented this make-work program for people who don't toe the Ecopantheon line. Your dad's the one who puts a quarter under your pillow. He doesn't believe in the tooth fairy, but he figures the tooth fell under your bed somewhere and you'll never know the difference."

"A quarter!" said Jason, apparently not interested in who took the tooth or why. "Last time I got a dollar!"

From behind the bedroom door came a muffled shout. "Quiet in there, Jason, or the tooth fairy won't come!"

"Mom! She's already here!"

"He. I'm a he," said Gnorf.

"I want my money," said Jason.

Gnorf sighed. "Okay, the rules say I gotta do what you say. But you have to stay in here and keep absolutely quiet till I bring it."

"Okay," the boy nodded, and watched eagerly as Gnorf flitted to the floor and scrambled out of the room underneath the door, just as Mrs. Finlayson arrived. Dodging her feet, he flew on down the hall and left her scolding her son, who kept insisting, "I saw the fairy!"

Gnorf found Mrs. Finlayson's purse sitting on the kitchen counter, providentially open.

A quarter. What was a quarter? He'd only said that because he'd heard it somewhere, but he'd never had a close look at any real money.

No, no, not a quarter—the kid wanted a dollar. Wasn't that one of those coloured pieces of paper? They kept them inside these leather envelopes, a wallet it was called . . . yes, there were some.

If the papers in the wallet were not dollars but something else, Gnorf had no way of knowing, since he'd never had any need to cultivate literacy. There was a nice red one, that would do . . . Quickly he pulled it out and rolled it into a long tube nearly as tall as himself, then VTOL'd out of the purse and buzzed down the hall again just in time to dodge through the bedroom door as Jason's mother closed it behind her on her way out.

He flittered over to the bed and dropped the rolled-up paper in Jason's hand.

"Wow! Thanks!" said Jason, and unscrolled the bill. "I can read," he informed Gnorf.

"Bully for you."

"F-i-f-t-y. Five-O. Is that five dollars? Wow! It does work! I wished on a star I would see you and you would bring me lots of money!"

"Great," said Gnorf, and flew back to the windowsill.

"Thanks, tooth fairy!" The boy grinned, showing his toothless gap, then wiggled another tooth between thumb and forefinger. "See you next time!"

"MMmmff. Not if I can help it." Gnorf crawled out through the window and flew back to the fence post.

"Hey, wishing star!" he yelled at the spangled heavens.

"Over here," the star said from slightly further west than when it had first appeared. "If you'll recall, the earth rotates, thus causing an apparent movement of the heavenly objects—"

"Shuddap. I thought you said you had to avoid too much supernatural intervention, so what's the idea of having me get caught by that brat?"

Gnorf could have sworn the star shrugged. "By morning he'll think it was a dream. His parents will just think they made a mistake and put a fifty-dollar bill there instead of a one."

"Fifty?" Gnorf said. "I gave him fifty times as much as he was supposed to get? Fifty?"

The star winked. "Hadn't you better be getting that tooth back to your supervisor?"

"Just you wait," Gnorf said. "I'll get my wish!"

The star scintillated primly. "Do tell. You already know what the odds of that are!"

*

The star was right about the odds, of course, but one thing Gnorf had learned from gardening was that when you don't like the odds against you, you do something to change them. Supposing he were the only one to see the first star? Gnorf spent two weeks thinking about it. He wished every night, just on principle, before starting on his tooth-collecting rounds, but of course someone else always got it. Then he got an idea, and the next time a cloudy day and his day off coincided, Gnorf hopped in a cab that was headed for the airport. He found an eastbound flight that was taking off shortly before dusk, boarded, and waited for the crew and passengers to get on.

For his vantage point he naturally chose the cockpit, where he could have been more or less comfortable, if only it hadn't been for the gremlin.

The big-eyed, gnarled little creature crouched on the back of the pilot's chair, watching Gnorf suspiciously.

"Don't mind me," Gnorf said, a little nervously. "I'm just along for the ride."

"Planning a crasssssh thisssss ffffffflight," hissed the dark sprite, as the captain and co-pilot came in and began going through their pre-flight checks.

Gnorf swallowed. As a fay, of course, he was immortal and could not be killed, though in a plane crash his wings might get crumpled a little. It was the gremlin itself that made him shudder.

Sure, gremlins were under the Ecopantheon, so they couldn't be downright evil. But they were a peculiar sort of sprite; no-one was quite sure where they came from or what they used to do before the Industrial Revolution and the invention of the airplane. In any case, Gnorf being still a garden gnome at heart, he could never feel all that comfortable with the more destructive sorts of spirits.

"Sweet Atlanta, here we come," sighed the captain.

"Still getting your hands dirty in that garden?" the co-pilot asked.

"You bet," said the captain, grinning. "It's like heaven, Ross!"

Then the men dropped their banter, concentrating on the instruments and the instructions from the control tower that issued from the radio. But Gnorf lost interest in their activities when the gremlin slid past them and into the instrument panel.

He watched anxiously until the creature reappeared, a fanged grin splitting its face. "I malfffunction their low fffffuel indicator," it boasted, "ssssso when I leak tanksssssss, they not know!" It cackled drily. When the plane was airborne, it slipped through the roof to the outside of the plane, headed for the fuel tanks, Gnorf supposed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Matthew Lawrence speaking," the captain said, and went on to talk about cruising altitude and E.T.A and other things of interest to mortals.

Gnorf sat on the co-pilot's shoulder, chewing his lip. Up front, as he looked anxiously for his astronomical chance, he saw the murky clouds turning crimson in the lowering sun. A few cloud fays gave him startled looks as they peered into the plane, but the flight machine quickly left them behind. Then the plane broke out into the blue aether above the clouds, and Gnorf's breath caught at its beauty. He almost forgot the gremlin until Captain Lawrence leaned back and started talking to Ross again.

"Yep, nothing like the gardens of the south. When you're in a business like this, it does a man good to get his hands right into the old terra firma."

Gnorf flinched at the reappearance of the gremlin. The wizened thing said nothing to him this time, merely grinning maliciously. Captain Lawrence was going to hit terra firma a lot harder than he planned.

Gnorf looked from the sky, to the gremlin, to the captain and back to the deepening sky again. Suddenly, out in the blue, the wishing star winked at him.

"Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight," the words rushed out through Gnorf's mouth, "Wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight! I wish the plane would be safe!"

The gremlin started up with a strangled cry. "Noffffair! Noffffffair! I tell on you!"

The co-pilot suddenly went stiff as a troll at sunrise. "Holy— Matt, look at that! How can we be so low on fuel?"

The captain's eyes, on the instrument indicated by his co-pilot, went round. "Oh, Lord, it must be a leak!"

They sent out a mayday; but, it emerged, there was enough fuel to turn back and make a normal landing. As the mortals set about arranging this, Gnorf sat back in relief, though the gremlin's burning eyes still focussed on him. The plane banked, heading back toward its departure point, and the wishing star passed out of sight again.

Once they were safe on the ground and deplaning, Gnorf ignored the curses the gremlin heaped on him from behind. But he did spare one back-

ward glance for Captain Lawrence, and wished he only had a little gnome dust to green the man's thumb.

*

The weather cleared next evening, and Gnorf, fresh from a second sentencing in Her Ladyship's judgment hall, trudged dejectedly through the slush in the Finlayson back yard; Jason had lost another tooth.

"Psst. Tooth Fairy."

Gnorf glanced upward. "Well?"

"Want a hot tip?" The star winked at him.

Gnorf scowled. "I've had enough of playing the odds, thanks."

"Don't be a sore loser. Look, you don't want to keep up this tooth-snatching business till the end of the world, do you? There's an alternative. A sure thing, in fact."

Gnorf folded his arms, clutching his wand, and eyed the star suspiciously. "What alternative? I've been sentenced to tooth fairy duties for all time now!"

The star snickered. "Uh-huh, but not for Eternity. What I'm trying to say is, you're working for the wrong outfit, Gnorf. It happens that the last time you were in that house over there, you invoked a certain power. Of course, nobody in the Ecopantheon could hear you. But the power in question could and did hear you, so he started keeping an eye on you. And luckily for you he was watching you when you so kindly used your wish to save the airplane. He likes that kind of stuff, you see—generosity, courage, you know?"

When Gnorf only gave a growl for reply, the star cleared its throat and went on, "Well. Since you've been nice and not naughty, he thought you'd like to know he has a job opening—something right up your alley, tending plants."

It sounded too good to be true. "What kind of plants?"

"Poinsettias, I believe. And Christmas cacti. Holly. Mistletoe. Pine trees—"

Gnorf twisted the wand in sweaty palms. Leave the Ecopantheon and join the Outsiders? It gave him shivers! But then, what had the Ecopantheon ever done for him? The odds of ever getting out of tooth-fairying any other way . . . Well, he'd had enough of playing the odds. If there was a sure thing in Saint Nick's employ . . . poinsettias and mistletoe were not quite a country garden, but they were something.

"I get to wear a red cap again?"

"Whatever you like. No dress code."

"Weeee-hooo!" said Gnorf, and tossed the wand onto the Finlaysons' soggy compost heap.

"I thought you'd see it that way," the star said, smug as a cat. "Look at that, you got yourself a once-in-a-lifetime wish, blew it on some mortals, and still got a chance for a better job, completely out from under the thumb of the Ecopantheon this time. What do you suppose the odds of that are, hmmm?"

"Who cares. Have a nice evening, wishing star," said Gnorf. Then he rose into the dusk, and made a beeline for the North Pole. ✨

"WEEKLY WORLD NEWS" headline:

'HUBBY'S TIME MACHINE SENDS NAGGING WIFE BACK TO STONE AGE!'

by J. Nelson

'jesus' i think and i stare but
mostly i blink and rub my eyes.
and it's still there:
all colour, not shades, but the actual colours
bright and perfect like cereal box cartoons
black and green and more green—
plants rising from the soil like feather dusters
they swallow the sky.
i can smell the word 'millenia'
it clumps in my throat like damp laundry.
'jesus' i think and hear my thoughts,
'that bastard's really gonna catch shit this time.'

everything is new.
the sun gleams like waxed linoleum
and even the dirt is fresh.
i have spent my life
crusading against dirt,

purging chrome and porcelain and ceramic tile
with crumpled underwear and ajax.
but this dirt bubbles with life and invites
fingers to plunge into its bosom, erotic
as sex in the afternoon (how long has it been?)
it is somehow pure.

time is everywhere.
at home time is a prisoner:
it's locked in my wristwatch; in the stove clock;
inside the grandfather that always needs dusting.
time is shoved into slots between dinner and bridge-guests,
vacuuming and dishes, gaps between soap-operas.
here time is free: it stretches out like a kitten,
yawns and falls back into sleep.
my watch blinks 12:04.
i laugh out loud (how long has it been?)

what can my husband be thinking right now
smug in his favourite blue armchair?
he probably imagines me screeching
at a pack of neanderthals
who have tracked mud across my clean shore,
or driving dinosaurs into extinction
with whines and jabs of my finger.
i no longer care: i give the grinning bastard
three weeks before he's buried beneath
an avalanche of TV dinner trays.

i peel off my clothing
and squeeze mud through my toes and stroll
to the beach to watch fish evolve.

ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

A.J. AXLINE (*The Dark Terror of Fifi*), a freelance writer born and raised in Edmonton, is working on a book of short, short stories. He warns that his view of the universe should not be mistaken for the real thing.

CAROLYN CLINK (*Much Slower than Light*), production coordinator for Québec Or, Canada's largest printing company, lives in Toronto. Her prize-winning poetry has been published in *Celebrate Our City* (McClelland and Stewart) and *Poetry Ontario*.

DONNA FARLEY (*Astronomical Odds*) is a *matushka* (literally, a little mama!) or wife of an Orthodox priest, and has two daughters. Her fiction has appeared in *CATFANTASTIC*, *Dreams and Visions*, and *Horizons SF* (another Ecopantheon story); upcoming publications in *Weird Tales* and *UNIVERSE 2*.

BETH FOGLIATTI (*Once a Knight is Enough*) is a Toronto writer currently attending the University of Alberta. She shares her living space with 15 birds, an iguana, and a pilot who's been in a holding pattern since '67.

ALLAN GOODALL (*At My Chamber Door*), a full-time computer analyst who dwells in North York, Ontario with his wife Leann in something not quite approaching abject splendour, hopes to someday learn all of the words to the Bugs Bunny square dance song. This is his first professional sale.

ALICE MAJOR (*Puce Fairy Book*) kissed the wrong frog and found herself magically living in Edmonton, wearing boots instead of glass slippers, and writing poetry, fiction and articles about utility financing.

DIANE MAPES (*Surrender Dorothy!*) has sold humorous fiction to *ON SPEC*, *Asimov's* and *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and darker tales to *Interzone*. She lives on an island outside Seattle and seldom barbeques.

J. NELSON (*Hubby's Time Machine*) lives in Victoria in a house of great writers who occasionally let him do their dishes.

HAZEL SANGSTER (*Sudden Death Overtime*) is an Edmonton hockey mother.

MICHAEL SKEET (*Pushing Buttons*) is currently an economic refugee in central Canada. His heart is pure and his soul devout, but he is paying for past sins by working for the CBC. He is co-editing *Tesseract's*⁴.

HUGH A.D. SPENCER (*Why I Hunt Flying Saucers*), an international consultant for museums, science centres and art galleries, has been threatening lately to write a 30-volume space opera series, *How I Saved the Entire Universe with My Very Big Gun* (working title) for Baen Books.

JENA SNYDER (*Handicapped Help*) extends apologies to her mother, who has been begging Jena for years to "write a nice love story about two *normal* people." (*Hey, at least it's a love story . . .*)

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ABOUT OUR ARTISTS

RICHARD BARTROP (*Why I Hunt Flying Saucers*) apparently so offended the alien life forms depicted in his illustration that they beamed him up. (Read: "we have no bio.")

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK (*Handicapped Help, Astronomical Odds, and GST Cartoon*) won the 1991 Aurora Award for artistic achievement. She offers this advice: "Never moon a werewolf."

JAMES LONG (*Sudden Death Overtime*) is an Edmonton artist in his third decade of existence. His work appears in various publications. This is his second appearance in *ON SPEC*.

KEVIN KURYTNIK (*The Daring Recreational Exploits of the Domestic Cockroach!*) was born in Norquay, Saskatchewan and currently resides in Calgary. Since the age of four, a party has been constantly raging in his head, one to which his brain has consistently *not* been invited.

NANCY NILES (*Pandora Meets Groucho*) produced both our cover and the erotic scenes featuring the moose.

DORY A. RIKKONEN (*Pushing Buttons*) is currently working on art pieces for Calgary's First Night Festival.

DUNCAN WELLS (*Once a Knight is Enough*) is a Toronto freelance illustrator who a) hates Toronto and is thinking of moving to either Massachusetts or BC; b) plans to make a living writing and illustrating his own children's books; or c) both of the above. This is his first magazine illustration. ☿

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